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Note from the Editors

We were saddened recently by the loss of one of our supporters. Debbie Reeder, wife of editor Mark Reeder, passed away after a long struggle with illness. We would like to dedicate this issue to Debbie; to her strength, her courage, and her immeasurable spirit.

June 2003

One year ago today, we opened our first issue with: Welcome to the first issue of DEEP MAGIC.

We are delighted that Deep Magic is still going strong. When we started, we had 90 readers who had subscribed, not knowing what our first issue would be like (thanks Mom & Dad, Uncle Rufus and Cousin Becky!). Today, we've passed over 700 subscribers, and more join us each month. We did a Google search for "high fantasy" recently and Deep Magic was the #1 rank. These are amazing accomplishments in only one year

We are also pleased to announce that our first serialized novel – LANDMOOR by Jeff Wheeler -- will be available this month to purchase. The hard work of our editorial staff and artists has come together, and we know you will find this trade paperback a great value. We will let our subscribers know by e-mail as soon as it shows up on Amazon, Barnesandnoble.com, and all the other on-line and brick-and-mortar retailers. It will be available in Europe as well through all the normal distribution channels. To our fans in Australia, it should be available through your distributors, too. Let us know if you have trouble getting copies of it.

If your favorite bookstore does not carry copies of LANDMOOR on the shelf, ask them to order it for you through their regular distributor. We are very excited about this opportunity. Every copy that is sold will help contribute to the operating costs of Deep Magic (like our webhosting costs) and allow us to start paying our contributing authors. Order a copy for your local library as well so that others can enjoy the quality of our fiction. LANDMOOR will be the first of many offerings.

This month continues the fantasy novel FOUND THINGS and also includes a wonderful article by M. Thomas on the subject of writing about heroes. We also have fantasy stories "The Bronze Sword" by Aaron Barham and "Legacy" by Ally Wrenn. Joel Brown's "Our Own Personal Gaia" is our science-fiction piece this month. And back by popular demand, chief editor Jeremy Whitted shares an article on why he is such a geek and proud of it. We're proud of him too, especially for the layout work he did on LANDMOOR. Can you tell we're a little excited about this?

This month we begin a new chapter in Deep Magic's history. To celebrate all the fantastic stories, articles, and artwork we have published over the last year, we are preparing a special award to recognize the great people who contributed their talents to Deep Magic. To vote for the best of the best, go here.

Thank you for reading and watch for a special "Summer Delirium" issue in July. And to all our readers in Croatia: Zivi dugo i dobra ("live long and well")

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

We had another sparse writing challenge, but we still had some good submissions. So see below for our picks from the previous month. Be sure read read the June writing challenge. We have another good one to test and hone your writing skills. For those of you who are shy about sending us a challenge, just remember that they are not meant to be polished, complete stories. These are, above all else, exercises to help you with the craft of writing. So give it a shot and send us your submissions by the 20th to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net. For last month, the submissions are below.

The Caregiver by Christine Schmidt
The Apothecant by Boyd Richardson

We also want to mention that writing challenge submissions are rarely edited by our staff. These submissions are exercises and not meant to be polished.

June 2003 Writing Challenge

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.

Sound familiar? If you're reading Deep Magic, odds are good that you identified the first line of The Hobbit as readily as an English Literature major would identify the source of, "Call me Ishmael." Creating a memorable first line requires thought, skill, and possibly a little luck. In a previous writing challenge, we requested an early hook into a story. That challenge focused on writing something within the first page or two that made the reader want to read further.

This month, the challenge is a little different. In fact, we have chosen to look at the challenge from another perspective. Rather than ask you to create early intrigue in your story, we are asking for creativity from a common starting point. That's right. We will supply the first line and you write the next 500 or so words. The purpose of this exercise is to show how people may view the same starting point differently and consider how they open a story by focusing on the first line.

Without further ado, here is the first line of your challenge:

The ground shuddered like an old woman warding off the chill of a winter morning, and then all was still.

The Caregiver
By Christine Schmidt

Lynne's mommy had tried to make them listen. Lynne heard her tell them not to put Marie in with the babies. To keep them together. But Marie was gone, too far away to make head pictures. Lynne's throat hurt. She'd been crying for Marie for a long time. She could see Marie through the gates. She was only two, but she was just as big as Lynne. "I have two shadows," She would say to anyone who'd listen, "one is named Marie." Lynne was only four, but she was smart, and she could even read some. She was good at Thinking too. If she Thinked real hard, she could make the buttons on the phone move. First the big button that read hook. Next the nine, and then the one two times. Then the phone could hear the screaming too. She could barely hear the phone talking, it was like a whisper, but Lynne hollered so loud her voice hurt her ears "I want to go HOME!"

"You little brat! Get back in that corner or you'll get it!"

"No! Let...my...sister...out!"

"She's not old enough to come out. Now shut up!"

Lynne craned her neck to look at the bad lady. Her mommy said not to talk to strangers, but her mommy also left her here. She tried to see her sister, she could hear her sister, crying so hard she was getting sick. She didn't like it when her sister puked. The bad lady should have listened to mommy. Lynne could take care of Marie, and Marie liked to play with the big kids. The bad lady should have listened. Lynne would make her listen.

"Let...her...go! She doesn't...(sniff)...like to play... with babies."

"I warned you! You have to learn to listen some time. Come here!"

When the bad lady grabbed her arm, her other hand reaching for her belt, Lynne Thinked as hard as she could Think. Harder than ever before so that a whole basket full of toys fell off the high shelf and onto the bad lady. Lynne ran and ran. The bad lady yelled a whole bunch of words that Lynne didn't know, and chased after her. But Lynne crawled under the couch and the bad lady couldn't lift it.

The back of the couch pushed up against the pen where the babies were. She could just reach Marie's hand. Marie was very scared. Her body shook, and her knuckles were white and her hand had snot on it, but she held on. "MOMMY! MOMMY! MOMMY! MOMMY! MOMMY!" When they broke the litany to breathe, Lynne could hear the bad lady on the phone. She could tell cause only one grown-up was talking.

Right away the door opened so hard the knob cracked the wall.

"What the hell are you doing to my babies!" Mommy had come! She snatched Marie from the pen and dried the wailing toddler with her blouse. "Shhhh. Mommy's here. Shhh. You're safe now."

"Your children are freaks, Leana."

"Where is Lynne?"

Lynne crawled out from under the couch. "I'm right here Mommy. That lady is mean. I want to go home."

"We'll go home. And we won't be coming back." Leana turned her back on the bad lady.

"Don't be too hasty now. It was for their own good. I was trying to protect the other children."

"The only children who needed protection were mine." Lynne dried her eyes on her mommy's shoulder and held onto Marie. They were safe.

The Apothecant
By Boyd Richardson

The council elder strode into the tribunal with gray robes swishing and two official witnesses hurrying to keep up. Several dozen townsfolk pressed to surround the portion of the dais where they were allowed to stand. Upon reaching his elevated pew, the council elder stooped in a bow of reverence to the accused and sat. The witnesses stood on either side of the pew, where they would remain throughout the tribunal.

The accused, Tarrley Johad, sneered through a hanging curtain of stringy red hair. Behind the curled lips, decayed teeth gritted where they met. Tarrley refused to bow, refused to give honor to the tribunal. His advocate tugged at Tarrley's shirt, but could not move him.

The elder sat and ordered the accused to sit. Tarrley took a long while before dropping to the pew and turning to look at the table of accusers, glaring at them with the same sneer.

"Tarrley Johad, you stand accused of pilfering stockweed from the apothecary's restricted groves and selling potent combinations without standing to do so. Do you deny these accusations?" The elder raised an eyebrow as he waited for an answer.

Tarrley's advocate stood and nearly dragged Tarrley to his feet. "Master Johad pleads innocence, Elder." Tarrley looked like he wanted to slug his advocate, but nodded his agreement.

"Please speak to the accusation, Master Johad."

"Huh?" The sneer had returned.

"The witnesses must hear your answer to the accusation."

"I didn't do it."

"Very well. Be seated. Master Gerrin, you may bring forth the accusers." The elder shifted in his seat until he faced the table of accusers.

Master Gerrin, a white haired man with a large belly and thick eyebrows arose and requested that the accusers be administered to so they could testify. After the elder nodded his acquiescence, a hooded apothecant approached the first accuser and placed a large cup of tangip brew before him. The accuser, a boy who had not quite reached manhood, drank and almost fell over.

The elder craned his neck, "Is he alright?" After the accuser nodded that he was fine, the elder continued, "Master Apothecant, please dose the accusers properly. None are yet grown men. You may begin, Master Gerrin."

"Thank you, Elder." Master Gerrin adjusted the rope under his belly, which left the robes a little out of place. "Identify yourself."

"Rickar Taivs."

"Do you know the accused?"

"Yes." Ricker's voice was monotone, an indication that the brew was working.

"Do you wish to accuse him of the offense proclaimed by the elder?"

"Yes."

"Please state your accusation."

By then, the boy's eyes were glazed over and his voice lacked all emotion. "Tarrley Johan sells Mirage Powder to the gypsies. I have seen him do it many times. He hires boys to steal the weed,

pays us with small amounts of powder. I met him when I was harvesting wheat for Staighlin Mouv. Tarrley gave me a small bit of the powder and told me I could earn much more if I worked for him. I didn't want to, but I wanted the powder. I craved it. So I did what he asked. I didn't like the things I was doing, so I told Tarrley I wanted to quit. He beat me and told me I couldn't. He would slug me in the middle of my back when I did not do what he wanted. I learned to do all he asked and not talk back to him. He showed us how to harvest the weed and showed us how to pick the lock on the apothecary gate. I have harvested for Torrley for almost two years. Until I was caught."

"What happened when you were caught?"

"One of the apothecants administered to me and I told him where Tarrley kept the weed and the powder."

"Thank you." Gerrin sat back down and reviewed a scroll.

The elder pursed his lips and stared at Tarrley. "You may inquire, Master Advocate."

Tarrley's advocate stood and looked at the boy, tears welled in the corner of his eyes. "When you were caught, were you, yourself accused of any offenses?"

"Yes."

"What were you accused of?"

"Pilfering from the apothecary."

"Were you to be punished for that offense?"

"Not after I told the truth."

Tarrley snorted and kicked his advocate in the foot.

The advocate continued. "Do you know if someone else has treated Tarrley as he treated you?"

The accuser looked confused. "I do not know."

"You were not punished for your offenses because Tarrley forced you to do what you did, is that right?"

"Yes."

The advocate swallowed uncomfortably, "But, you do not know if someone else forced Tarrley, do you?"

"No."

"Nothing further."

The elder shook his head. "Master Accuser, you may sit. Master Gerrin, you may inquire of another."

The rotund man stood and started to point to the next boy in line, but the apothecant shook his head. "I administered to the accused when I investigated this claim. Let me speak." The apothecant lowered his hood, revealing long, flowing red hair. His resemblance to the accused was unmistakable.

Master Gerrin smiled. "I would inquire of Apothecant Lertay Johad."

Tarrley exploded with rage. "You are lying. Filthy whorespawn!"

The Apothecant spat at Tarrley's feet. "I request administration. I will testify."

Tarrley's face paled, anger danced in his eyes. He lunged toward his brother, but the apothecant hurled a handful of black dust at Tarrley. Tarrley's body stiffened instantly and he fell to the ground like a statue.

The apothecant looked at his fallen brother with disdain, loathing, and sorrow. He walked to the accuser's table and waited for the cup of tangip brew.

Survey: The Lamp Post Awards

The staff at Deep Magic has decided to create a "best of Deep Magic" award. Over the last year, we have brought you some of the best and brightest stories, articles, and artwork available in the world. We would like to recognize these authors and artists by picking one from each category as being the "best" for the year. After doing a little research and discussing it as a staff, we have decided to name this prestigious award: The Lamp Post Awards.

We decided to pay homage once again to C.S. Lewis and his influence on our view of fantasy and science fiction. But it also has connotations beyond the worlds that Lewis created. Over the last year, Deep Magic has been a beacon drawing in new, formerly unrecognized talent.

We need you, our readers, to vote on the finalists. Here is how the process works. The editorial staff recommended our favorite stories in each category: Fantasy Fiction stories, Science Fiction stories, Articles, and Artwork. We would like you to visit our poll page on the website and cast your vote for your favorite pieces. You have all summer to do so - voting ends on August 15. That will give you some time to read any stories you may have missed. All of these represent the best that Deep Magic has offered over the last year. Now it is time to pick the best of the best.

The winner in each category will receive the prestigious Lamp Post Award. We'll keep it a secret what that will be until the winners are announced in our September issue.

Feel free to use the Message Board to try and win other readers to your way of thinking. We're sure the authors and artists would enjoy the feedback, too.

Fantasy Short Story

Birth Of a Hero by Steve Westcott (Feb 2003)
Bliss: A Fairy Tale by Steven Richards (Nov 2002)
Disappearing by Lori Erickson (Oct 2002)
Jase's Challenge by Clover Autrey (Mar 2003)
Maia by JT Slane (Oct 2002)
Mortal Amusement by Brendon Taylor (Sep 2002)
Skygrave by Margo Lerwill (Apr 2003)
Slaying the Dragon by M. Thomas (Aug 2002)
The King of Wolvmeadow by Peter Dahl (Jun 2002)

SciFi short story

A Taste Of Earth by Darrell Newton (May 2003)
Andie and I by Ryan Peterson (Jul 2002)
Cinder-Relic by Melva Gifford (Dec 2002)
Kylaan Zn by Ian Fulton Roberts (Nov 2002)
Oranges and Lemons by Ays Marin (Mar 2003)
Prometheus' Tears by Mark Reeder (Feb 2003)
Refuge by Reuben Fox (Jun 2002)
What Power In a Word? by Alexander R. Brown (Aug 2002)

Artist

Christophe Vacher "The Source" (June 2002)
Ciruelo Cabral "Cadmo" (November 2002)
Donato Giancola "Dragonflight" (December 2002)
Geoff Taylor "Sacred Seven" (April 2003)
Jonathon Earl Bowser "A Dark Knight" (June 2002)
Kinuko Craft "Scent of Magic" (February 2003)
Les Edwards "The List of Seven" (January 2003)
Ted Nasmith "Luthien" (May 2003)

Article

A Tale Told By An Idiot by Gary Allen
Fantasy and Cliches by Robin Hobb
Harry Potter Goes to Court by Brendon Taylor
Notes About the Sword by M. Thomas
On Writing by Rob Sawyer
Tale Of a Talent Gone Good by Charles Finlay
The Economics Of Being a Fantasy Author by Jeff Wheeler
Why Do People Read Fiction? by David Farland

Results for our May 2003 poll: What is the Best Fantasy Relic of All-Time?

1. Bhellium
2. The One Ring
3. Excalibur
4. Callandor
4. Sword of Shannara
6. Black Cauldron
7. Sorceror's Stone

View complete results.

Go to the website and vote!

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

Legacy
By Ally Wrenn

"You must be cursed to be blessed." Rosaran's voice crackled with a gentleness brought by age.

Mimsor could not bear to take her gaze from the round, stained-glass window overlooking the great Steppe City in the uppermost tower of Castle Hringoth. Eyes searching the surface finally found Rosaran's time-worn face reflected there. Black robes inlaid with golden threaded runes hid the longer beard she knew was there. She met his concerned reflection with a determined front.

"My people…" Her voice cracked. It was, after all, only her thirteenth naming day. She took a breath and began again in a whisper. "There is nothing left to lose."

"Highness-" Rosaran began.

"Do it." Mimsor tore her eyes from the window and met Rosaran's. He closed his mouth without argument this time, and set about his books on the table beside him.

Glass clinked, liquid poured, Rosaran muttered to himself, and Mimsor returned her gaze to the silent city below, wondering if she had just saved her people only to doom them later.

* * *

Eursale sighed at her reflection, brushing circlets of pinestraw-colored hair away from her bare, dark shoulders. The sleeveless blue gown matched her somber mood that night. A chill draft blew in from the window overlooking the bay.

Mimsor returned her gaze to the silent city below, wondering if she had just saved her people only to doom them later.

Xry rose to close it and Eursale watched the copper-skinned young woman latch the window shut. Despite being only three naming days older, Xry acted more like a guardian than a playmate or maid.

"I don't think I'll ever marry, Xry."

Xry's reflection sat back down on the bed, opening a leather-bound book.

"I think I'll join the devotees of the Sun."

Her maid snorted. "They're all male."

"The Moons then. I'm sure they'll accept me. I'll be such a prestigious addition."

Xry glanced up sharply, teal eyes showing no signs of merriment in their reflection. "You shouldn't joke of such things," she said, before turning her back to Eursale.

Eursale made a face in the mirror. Xry had always been sensitive when Eursale spoke of joining such societies. It wasn't unheard of for lower royalty, especially siblings, to do so. It avoided squabbles when it came to who was to rule. Her older half-brother had Cipt well in hand, despite the current animosity with the western land of Dorngh.

"I'm sorry, Xry."

She watched Xry's back in the mirror. The girl didn't budge. Standing, Eursale turned and

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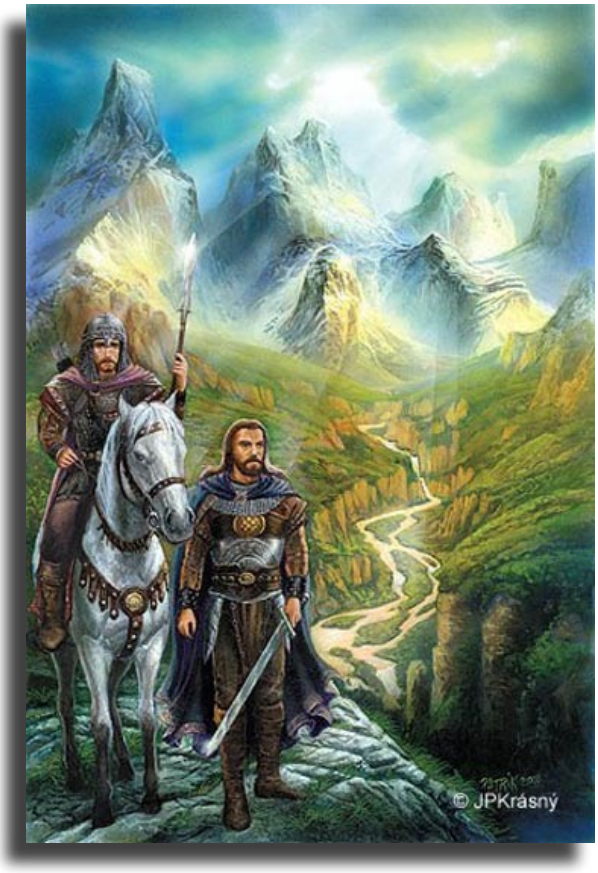
Feature Artist
Jan Patrik Krasny

Age: 47
Residence: Prague,Czech Republic
Marital Status: married
Children: none
Hobbies: art, film, hermetical philosophy
Personal Quote: "Everything is and equally isn't illusion"; "animals are friends, not food."
Favorite Book or Author: Tolkien, Josef Zezulka-*Philosophy of Being*
Started Painting In: Since my early childhood; I've been a freelance painter since 1982.
Artist Most Inspired By: There are many, from ancient to the contemporary ones. Still, most of all I'm delighted by the fantasy artists.
Mediums You Work In: gouache, acryl, air brush, oil, recently the digital painting.
Educational/Training Background: I was trained as a textile window dresser; a school of artistic crafts specializing in paper, toys, and decorative objects.
Schools Attended: The Academy of Arts in Prague.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: So far, they have been published in up to 150 science fiction/fantasy titles with my covers - both in the Czech Republic and other European countries.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: http://patrik.scifi.cz



Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: It happend somehow spontaneously - probably due to my bad deeds in my past lives - and I have just developed the skill.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: My work on book covers is classical fantasy; in comics I have pursued primarily the mythology. My independent production can be described as Plutonic imagination with catastrophic undertone.

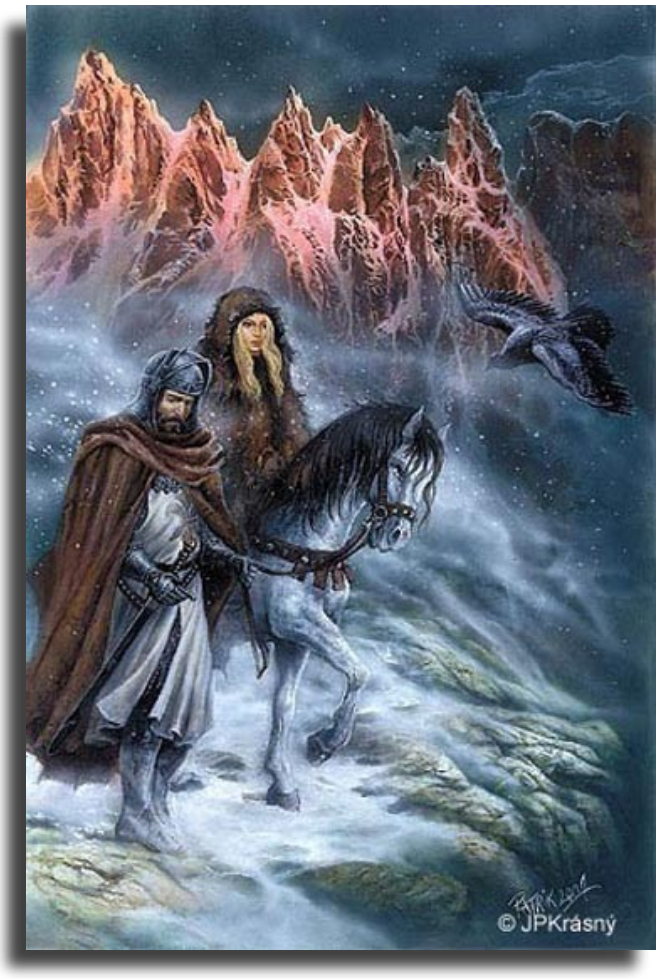
Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Inspiration can be found everywhere; the life is inexhaustible source of stimulations.

Feature Artist: Jan Patrik Krasny

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story)
A: The picture PIETY is an allegory, in which I've parted with certain illusions of my life. Another title for the picture is "A Tribute to an Old Enemy".

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: The list would fill up several pages. It's same as in the case of inspiration.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: That I'm able to pursue this genre, and strangely enough, I can make a living with it. (Up until 1989, everything that wasn't so called 'socialistic realism' was forbidden.) And, of course, the European SF Society Award in the category "Best Artist of 2002".



Notes On the Hero, for Writers Who May Have One in Their Story

By M. Thomas

For Debbie Reeder, and all the other every-day heroes.

Antigion raised his sword. The masses fell, oohing, before him.

Because that's what they do, right? Heroes pull out swords, and crowds fall down.

And the hero looks a little surprised, because a year ago he was just a boy on a farm, or a boy on the streets or, not to leave out gender-reversal, a lady's maid or a scullery girl. Could have knocked them over with a feather when they found out that odd-shaped freckle was really a celestial bar-code, blipping on the sorcerous radar of every wizard within a hundred miles once they reached puberty.

You won't find me arguing the traditional hero's genesis. I've read Joseph Campbell, and I get it. "Poor kid makes good with moldy magical artifact," has been a winning recipe since the dawn of time. Who am I to argue?

But just because the hero's formula is solid, doesn't mean there's no room for discussing the writing of a hero.

What people tend to forget is that war is tough. Teeth get knocked out—sometimes even the front ones. Hair gets torn. Thumbs get broken around swords. Warriors get bent in bad places and don't always heal properly.

Stereotypes

Again, just because there is a workable formula, doesn't mean your hero has to fall into a mold. I've about had enough of blond, or sandy, or fair hair. Ditto for blue, or ocean-like, or pale eyes. And the rocky jaws have got to go. In this day and age, any hero who looks remotely like this example is just fodder for humorists like me: He (she) had pale eyes, clear as the sky on a good day, a firm jaw, and golden hair upon which the sun lingered enviously.

Look, everyone gets pimples. They even had them in the middle ages.

But are pretty heroes the only stereotype? Of course not. Enter the antithesis, the war-scarred veteran who hopped off the hero train somewhere around having to pull their weight on the streets by thieving, and got back on at the intersection of "a prodigious rescue of some important person," and "unintended heroism in the line of duty that caught the eye of some important person, who assumed that because they were heroic, they were also wise and knowing." Turns out, yes, a few pages later, they are. Amazing. But let's describe this type of hero.

His (her) clear eyes held a hint of pain, his (her) mouth was set in a line above his (her) firm jaw, and the reflection of battlefield campfires settled jealously on his (her) hair.

Notice the similarities? Oh yes, you can add a few character-defining scars, but it's still just

a pretty hero after a hard day's work. What people tend to forget is that war is tough. Teeth get knocked out—sometimes even the front ones. Hair gets torn. Thumbs get broken around swords. Warriors get bent in bad places and don't always heal properly. Months of porridge and hard-tack make skin sallow, and no amount of firelight can make jaundice pretty.

Watch out for the stereotypes. They are called stereotypes because they've already been done. The solution? You'll have to come up with it. Large girls who write bad poetry, perhaps. (See "Found Things.") Heroes with a squint. Heroes without birthmarks. Heroes with thinning hair. Heroes who can't dance, or hunt well. Heroes raised in perfectly normal, healthy households who, despite all the familial support, still go on to do amazing things. You'll come up with something, and it will be delightful.

Let me be clear here. I'm not necessarily advocating making some deformed caricature into a hero and piling the weight of a heroic adventure on their shoulders. (Although someday I'm going to write about an ugly, stupid hero, and people will love him or her. See if I don't.) My purpose here is to remind writers of the over-baked stereotypes and give some ideas on how to avoid them. In the end, this comment by Jeff Wheeler puts it nicely in a nutshell: "The ability to relate to the hero in some way is more important than the physical attributes." When we get all caught up in lush description of features, which is all too easy to do in fantasy, we forget that what really appeals to a reader is someone recognizable—someone with flaws, someone ordinary who overcomes the odds—and very much like many of the people surrounding us every day. Who knows? It might even be you.

Heroes and Magic People

In accordance with the heroic formula, heroes must meet up with magic people. This is because tradition dictates the hero must be filled in on their destiny and all the events leading up to their destiny. This filling in process, usually done in dialogue, is what editors lovingly call "effing" back-story and "effing" info-dumps. The expletives, of course, refer to "editor's favorite."

Here's how it happens. An author has finished the hero's first battle scene. The hero is wide-eyed and amazed, as well as a little full of themselves. The magic person of choice then sits the hero down and, in several unbroken paragraphs that may go on for pages, explains to the reader, via the hero, all about the history of the world, the ancient enmities, the hero's great-great grandfather and how he saved the day, how the hero has been hidden ever since, how perilous the hero's journey will be, and how important it is to have dry socks.

Don't info-dump and back-story your hero's origins. Just don't. It's dull and predictable. Draw it out within the story somehow. Drop clues that remain unanswered for a page or two or, for the daring writers, a chapter or two. Do not sit your hero down by the fire/on a traveling wagon or ship/in the library and give him or her a good talking to. Ask yourself this: when your parents (or perhaps your science teachers) sat you down for the birds and the bees, was there a whole lot there you didn't already know?

Your reader knows it is the hero. Your reader knows they have languished, hidden or unrecognized, since birth. Your reader doesn't need to know their journey will be perilous because yes, they've figured that one out, too. All your reader really needs to know is what happens next. Everything else can be picked up, via the hero, in bits of conversation, old legends that suddenly make more sense, old family stories about "odd Uncle Yahn and his wanderings" that explain certain geography. Let the reader discover it as the hero does—not through the traditional authorial mouthpiece that is the magical person, but through experience. Keep the magical person in reserve

for the impossible-to-escape scenarios in which orbs of power and mind-control are all that will save the day.

Heroes and Villains

They are the yin and yang. You really can't have one without the other. A hero without a villain is just a bully, and a villain without a hero is just some poor schlub trying to overcome the limitations of a poor socio-economic class and bad parenting.

If you've read my article about villains, you know I don't approve of them being stupid or unprepared. Neither do I approve of it with heroes. (Although I will write that stupid, ugly fellow. Watch me.)

The purpose of the villain is to make the hero.

I repeat. The purpose of the villain is to make the hero.

The hero's trials against the villain become the foundation for the hero's eventual success. If the hero wins too easily, he or she is not believable. The villain is the process by which the hero comes into their own. With each win, and more importantly, with each defeat, the hero edges further out on that ledge of heroic no-return. A stupid, cackling villain is not going to make your hero believable, partly because no one actually "cackles" anymore, and partly because if they were that stupid, the hero's great-great grandfather would have dispatched them earlier on.

It seems more and more apparent that heroes and villains must be near-equals these days. So then, if you're writing about a stupid hero, the villain must be equally stupid, and perhaps successful only by a chain of happy circumstances. But if your hero is wise, so then must be the villain, each of them clear-minded in their purpose, and with the siege engines to back it up. Whether your hero dispatches the villain by sword or by magic, your audience must believe the hero has won through actual effort, not just luck of the gods.

A Hero's Welcome

It's hard to end a hero. Well, why not? You've put some effort into the lad or lass. In many cases they've gone through a gamut of trials that are metaphors for our own lives. Don't deny it. That dragon your hero battles on page 326 is your troubled youth, your battle against the publishing giants, your fight against all sorts of things. You may have convinced yourself your hero is completely opposite from you. You're probably wrong.

We write our heroes for many different reasons. To explore ourselves, to defy stereotypes, to get revenge on the social groups we could never insinuate ourselves into no matter how hard we tried--the golden-haired, witty ones who always listened to just the right ballads and wore just the perfect doublets…

Eh hem. As I was saying.

We write these heroes for specific reasons. There isn't the author born that hasn't yet begun with something of themselves buried in each page. Writing fantasy is not a spectator sport, and anyone who tells you differently isn't writing very good fantasy.

The truth is, heroes change. That's what we admire about them. Because in their changing we find small nuggets of the human experience, our human experience, to latch on to and enjoy. Whether it's defeating the dragon, or laughing at ourselves for having placed so much importance on just the right ballads and just the right doublets…in the end we are enriched because the truly effective hero is someone we identify with, and through them we see that particularly smooth tunnel

that comes out on the other side of adversity, where there's a large party and all our companions are cheering us on and dipping us a mug of ale from a very large vat. Sometimes, at these parties, we get to wear fancy hats. Sometimes, we just hang around the cheese plate grinning like idiots.

So whether your hero dies in the end, or becomes king, make sure he or she has had a fantastic ride. And make sure you take your reader along with them, by making that hero a familiar figure your reader can identify with. Put something of yourself in them, and I can almost guarantee you've put a little of your reader in there, too.

Summation

Antigion sat up. He was broken in several places, and they hurt. The new scars would cover the old, and the blood be washed away, eventually.

The princess hurried toward him, her arms open wide. She buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing with relief, then drew off his steel helm and ran her fingers across his bald head.

"Oh," she said, taking a good look at him for the first time. "Oh, dear."

She pulled away with a brave smile. "Dear Antigion. The kingdom thanks you for your service this day."

Then she took his hand, shaking it with a vigorous good intent. "And I am certain you and I will be the best of friends."

Ah, well, thought Antigion. Some heroes become kings. Some just move on with their lives.

He sat up, whistling tunelessly through the gap in his front teeth, and began searching through the entrails of the dragon for his grandfather's sword.

The End

Our Own Personal Gaia
By Alexander Ralph Brown

At 3:15 A.M. local time, on Saturday, the 17th of June 2093, an alarm went off in a basement facility somewhere in Antarctica.

Young Stevie Phillips, a student working for the Earth Science Institute, had been assigned to the Antarctica listening post as part of his training and he hated it. Known as the Z-locker, the Antarctic post was the backwater of the ESI world. Here, Institute employees gathered and relayed telemetry from those worlds considered lost causes in humanity's never-ending quest for colonisation. In layman's terms, that meant Stevie Phillips sat at a desk during the midnight to 5 A.M. shift, playing solitaire or following the latest soccer scores over the ESI Newsnet, just waiting for something to happen at the dozens of consoles scattered across the 'Waiting Room'. On the rare occasion that an alarm did sound, it usually turned out to be a malfunction in the comm buffer or a crank satt intercept.

So, when the Dyer V2 Satt started sending in flash traffic telemetry - setting off an alarm on Stevie's console - he could have been forgiven for his lack of enthusiasm. He dragged himself wearily out of his seat, kicking an empty cola can across the room and cursing Professor Cribbin for ever putting his name on an application form. "It will be good for you," he had said. "Builds character. You'll get paid to do what you love and you know that the satt comm firms love people with experience."

Up in the top left corner, a single star was flashing. Stevie took one look at the name next to it and picked up the phone. This was no mistake.

Experience! Stevie snorted, brushing his fringe of thick brown hair back off his forehead. No matter what they said about the taming of the Poles, Stevie didn't believe that any place without a barber shop could be considered civilised.

Sighing, Stevie sank into another chair and lit up the monitor. A quick look at the sticker on the side showed him that this telemetry was coming in from the Medusa relay satt. So, the Linara sector then, he thought. Not much out there, a few star clusters, a couple of rogue moons zipping between star systems, a nebulae or two scattered between the asteroid belts… Another graveyard shift to report, he concluded. But, as he reached up to shut the screen off, he noticed a red banner flashing in the corner. Flash-traffic. Now that was unusual.

He tapped the screen twice, bringing up a trace program so that he could work out which satellite was transmitting the message. A series of electronic bursts gave birth to subspace pulses, which made their way through bandwidths unknown to the pioneers of radio, transmitting his orders through the wastes of space in scarce to no time. The pulses worked their way backwards through the relay stations many millions of circuits as they spun on themselves in orbit of a human colony known as Medusa.

Through those circuits and then back out into space, the subspace tracking bandwidth sought out the offending satellite like the tendrils of an amoeba feeling for sustenance. When it found the small robot probe in orbit of a devastated world the tracker 'turned' and went backwards, returning

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The Geek In Me
By Jeremy Whitted

I am the Wonderous Wizard of Latin, I am the Dervish of Declension, and the Conjuror of conjugation, with a million hit points, and maximum charisma…
-- Martin Prince, The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horrors VI

Right before starting this article, I took a look at the current results of the April poll. Lo and behold, there were nine votes for me in the 'which author would you like to read more from' section. After taking out the eight times I voted for myself, that means one of you out there wants to read another one of my articles. Well, Bjorn from Sweden, this article is for you!

I'm a geek and proud of it. I'm also a bit of a nerd, but really more of a geek when push comes to shove. The nerd in me stays up late at night on my Mac (the fact that I refer to my computer as 'my Mac' illustrates the point nicely), fiddling with the OS, reading the latest news at MacCentral.com, checking out the latest programs at VersionTracker.com, and downloading the cool ones that I really don't need. Not to mention downloading songs from Apple's new iTunes Music Store. I don't know why I do it. It's compulsion. It's twisted need. It is, quite frankly, the nerd in me.

While I'm proud of being a nerd ... I am even more proud of being a geek.

While I'm proud of being a nerd (I do wear glasses, but they're not thick and black, nor held together by masking tape), I am even more proud of being a geek. What's the difference, you say? Well, I'm glad you asked.

I considered myself to be, at one point, a bit of a Renaissance Man. I was good in sports, I would do most of the work on my car, I did well in school, I had friends in several different cliques...I even had a friend once refer to me as a Jack-Of-All-Trades. That was a huge compliment. But I've always had one love that screamed GEEK!!! from the rooftops. My love of Fantasy. And not just books, but good old-fashioned role-playing. Yes, that's right, Dungeons and Dragons. I am Martin, with my million hit points and maximum charisma (I am also, by the way, a severe Simpsons geek). I am the burly fighter, wielding my +2 sword against the evil Goblin Prince.

I started playing when I was about ten years old. Today, at 31, I play every Tuesday. I don't know why, other than the fact that it's fun. My wife thinks I'm a little weird, but she married me, so she has only herself to blame. My kids are too young to judge me, but I plan on corrupting them anyway. My friends? Well, they all play too, or at least they have in the past. I used to be kind of embarrassed to admit I played Dungeons and Dragons. But, quite frankly, that's when I had to worry about impressing people. I'm married now, so it's not like I have to worry about losing dates over it. Right? Besides, I've learned to embrace my geekdom.

Chances are, if you're reading this article, you have a bit of the geek in you, too. You don't have to be a gamer, by the way. Do you find yourself devouring fantasy books by the dozen? When I was 21 and in college, I was often bored. I found myself reading all the time. Literally. I read David Eddings' Belgariad and Mallorean series, all ten books, in eight days. I read Raymond Feist's

Magician: Apprentice and *Magician: Master* in just more than a day. I used to drive Jeff nuts (that's Jeff Wheeler, fellow Deep Magic geek). When a new Terry Brooks book would come out, I'd have it read before he could even buy it! It takes quite the geek to read that much. If you read like I used to, and you don't think you're a geek, you're only fooling yourself.

My reading bug took a serious hit the last two years of college. I majored in English Literature. I remember one semester I had 18 credits, 15 of which were literature courses (the sixth course was a grammar class). I had to read so much those two years, I still haven't fully recovered. I haven't read a new Terry Brooks book since. My Robert Jordan reading only got me to the fourth book. I tell everyone that I'll read the entire Wheel of Time series once it's complete, but really, who am I kidding? (Of course, he's helping me quite a bit by dragging it out until the end of time.) I do still read, but most of it is the stories that all of you submit to Deep Magic. But I still love Fantasy, and I'm still devoted to it. It's just that my outlet now is publishing this e-zine and playing D&D, rather than my former compulsive reading.

I remember how it all started. I was nine or ten and getting ready to play in my first D&D adventure with my older brothers and their friends. The DM helped me roll up my character. He was a fighter. His name: Athopolese. For those of you gamers out there, you'll appreciate it when I say we rolled up an 18/98 strength for that great fighter. What an amazing time I had. It opened me up to a whole new world. D&D has come a long way since those days (very early 80's when I started playing), but it's still fundamentally the same. A group of geeks (usually male, but not always) gathered around the kitchen table, rolling dice, talking stupid, feeding on Coke and chips, having a blast. Did I mention the geek part?

D&D is indirectly responsible for Deep Magic. Care to know how? Tough, I'm telling you anyway. It started back in high school, our freshman year, I think. Jeff and I were talking one day and D&D came up (we'd known each other since we were eight years old – somehow the subject eluded us until this point). I'd been playing for years, and he had just started with his brothers. I don't know who suggested it, but we decided to get together and play a little. Come to find out, the brand of D&D Jeff and his brothers had been playing was, well, odd. The main problem was there was no setting or story behind it. So I was the Dungeon Master (DM), and I took Jeff on his first real adventure (and boy, did I enjoy torturing him!). It was all pretty much over at that point. Jeff's imagination took over, and he has been the DM ever since. Worlds were created, epic adventures undertaken, and enough stories to fill a hundred novels were born. Brendon joined in the fun in the early 90's. He and Jeff became friends by Jeff telling him stories about the campaigns he'd run in the past. We corrupted him quickly with the joys of D&D, and we all discussed our dream of a publishing company. I actually discussed this part in an earlier Deep Magic article. Suffice it to say, D&D was the catalyst for what is now Deep Magic.

Deep Magic, oddly enough, is not a D&D-oriented e-zine. It's just normal fantasy and science fiction. While we came from a gaming background, we wanted Deep Magic to be a more mainstream Fantasy e-zine, one that would appeal to any fan of the genre. (As to why Science Fiction is part of the e-zine and what it brings to the table…well, that's a subject for another article.) Many of our readers, however, are gamers, as are all three founders. I don't think any of our editors are, but I'd sure love to get M. Thomas at a D&D table for a campaign. With her imagination and sense of humor, she'd be a blast. Not sure I could talk her into it, though. She may not be that much of a geek. And there's the fact that she lives hundreds and hundreds of miles away from me.

Of course, Jeff, Brendon and I live hundreds of miles away from each other, and that hasn't stopped us yet. Whenever occasion permits, we'll hook up for a two-day D&D fest. Back in August of 2001, a friend of ours was getting married in Utah. Brendon and I came down from Idaho (we live

on opposite ends of the state) and Jeff came out from California. We rented a hotel room and played D&D the whole time. Except when we were at the wedding, of course. Then, we just talked about it. And let's not forget our online role-playing. I set up message boards, a chat room, online manuals, a dice roller javascript…all so we could play D&D online from our respective homes. That lasted quite some time, until Deep Magic came along. Now all our free time is spent producing this e-zine. We're such major geeks it's almost not even funny.

So what's the point of this article? Well, let's face it…what's the point of any of my articles? I was just in a particularly geeky mood, and I thought I'd share. I hope, however, that all of you reading can embrace your own geekdom, however great or small it may be. The geeks (and the nerds, as well) were and are the ones to get picked on in high school. But let's face it: geeks have more fun.

The End

Artist Profile
Santiago Iborra

Titles

Top Left: In the Halls of Tharraghu
Bottom Left: Total Conquest
Bottom Right: Toll Brok'Baroll

Artist Website: http://www.quellion.com

The Bronze Sword
By Aaron Barham

On the evening of his last day with the caravan, Kelan sat staring into his campfire, wondering what the days ahead would bring.

Tomorrow, the caravan would enter the city of Ammadrash, but he would stay on the road running east. That much he knew. But what would happen on the road to Coronath? Who would he meet, there and along the way? What sights would he see? What dangers, what pleasures, what adventures lay ahead?

He saw motion off to one side, and looked that way. One of the caravan's men-at-arms stood close enough to the fire to be seen, but not so close as to be intrusive. The man held a cloth-wrapped cylindrical bundle in one hand.

The man said, "Could you do with company, lad?"

Kelan nodded, and the man sat across the fire from him.

"I'm called Zaliel Hardhand."

"Well met, Zaliel Hardhand. My name is Kelan, from Vendenesse Town."

"Well met, Kelan of Vendenesse. I saw you the other day, when that bunch of Moroghanni bandits hit us. You handled your pole-axe pretty well."

Praise from a professional fighting man was sweet in Kelan's ears. He flushed, and grinned. "Boys in Vendenesse like to knock each other around with quarter staves. A pole-axe isn't so different."

It had a broad, double-edged blade and was a bit thicker than was common. The polished metal of the blade reflected the firelight, but it was a dim and reddish gleam.

"I suppose it isn't." Zaliel was quiet for a bit. Then he said, "I've a story I need to tell you. Will you listen?"

"I will."

"Thank you. I wintered in a little town on the Nandash Plateau last year. There, I met a man from a land called Sipango. It lies so far to the east that you'll probably never hear its name again. That we had both traveled so far to meet in such an out of the way place amused us. We became friends. Before we parted, he gave me this."

The man unwrapped the bundle he carried. It contained a short sword in a wooden scabbard; it was only a little too long to be called a dagger. Zaliel handed it to Kelan.

The younger man put his hand on the hilt to draw it, then looked up at the soldier. Drawing a sword while in a social setting, without the permission of the others present, was a serious breach of courtesy. Zaliel nodded his permission.

Kelan drew the sword. It had a broad, double-edged blade and was a bit thicker than was common. The polished metal of the blade reflected the firelight, but it was a dim and reddish gleam. He studied the blade for a few seconds then said, "I've never seen a bronze sword before. It's got to be pretty old."

"Old, indeed, lad. The easterling told me it was made by a god when the world was young,

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Found Things
By M. Thomas

Author's Note: My heartfelt thanks to two special readers. Mark Reeder, without whose eloquent praise I might not have kept some of my best passages. And especially to the selfless devotion of my good friend, Steven McCrary, without whom it might not have all fit together.

This is for Steven, my first reader.

Chapter 8

"Missing got this from the Gasp house," Roger said. He slid the letter across the kitchen table to Croomb. The Inquisitor read it carefully. When he was finished, he looked at the boy.

"I have no idea what this means."

"It doesn't make a lot of sense on its own." Roger nodded. "But look at what we know. Item one: I came to Manking because my runes indicated an upset of some sort. The tremors didn't start until a few days ago, but now we know the Gasp mine has been failing for about a year.

"Shiny things to appease the dragon," Roger said. "Gold is shiny."

"Item two: the tremors always hit just after the tide comes in. At first I thought this meant they didn't have anything to do with the tide, but now I'm not so sure. When we went into the mine we found an underground cove. I'd like to see how high the water in the cove rises in relation to the tide outside."

"Why?" Croomb asked.

Roger chewed his lip a moment. "I don't really know. Just a feeling I have."

"Go on then."

"Item three: Esmariah Gasp is desperate to buy the Sealyham mine. The Sulks are desperate to have it too, only they know they can't get it without the Gasp name on the bargain."

"I don't understand that," Aunt Orangia said. "You said the Gasps and Sealyhams were on friendly terms. Why wouldn't she just go to them? They *are* family, after all."

"I don't know if I would call it friendly terms," Roger said. "From what I gather, the Sealyham view of the Gasps is just that of the lesser of two evils."

"And there's her pride," Missing said. "Utter told me she never asks for help."

"Pride–what nonsense." Orangia sniffed.

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casually walked over to where her maid sat. She didn't know what was wrong with letting Tlal rule uncontested. He had made a fine king so far, after the death of their parents, despite insisting on retaining his Princely title.

"I apologize, Xry," Eursale said, looking into her friend's face.

Xry stared at the book. With a grin, Eursale snatched it away. The stubborn girl folded her arms and stared at the wall. She didn't understand why Xry seemed to think that she was destined to rule in Steppe City. She waved the book under Xry's nose. Just when Eursale thought her plan had failed, Xry made a grab for the book. Smiling, she jerked the book out of her maid's reach.

A sharp rap on the door broke the game.

"Enter," Eursale called, looking to the door, book held aloft in one hand.

Xry used her distraction to filch the book back. To Eursale's surprise, Prince Uoqu stood at the door. A mere seven naming days old to her seventeen, he gazed up with bright green eyes and made a smooth bow, which both she and Xry returned with a curtsey.

"Arma Commander came with a messenger who said that you can go home now. Mother would like you to join her in the Round Room."

"Is the threat from Dorngh lifted then?" Xry asked softly.

Uoqu appeared puzzled, but Eursale diverted his attention. "Thank you, Highness. Tell Queen Wilue we are on our way."

Uoqu bowed again and hesitantly followed his guards down the corridor. Her own guards stood at attention, white and silver uniforms displaying the patch of dongen- the dripping dagger- unruffled.

Eursale moved to the boudoir, picking up a pear-studded blue ribbon to tie her hair back. Home. Tlal had sent her across the sea and lands to Binde for her safety, so he had said. Now, finally, she would soon get to sleep in her own bed and play rhombloid underneath the shaded walkways of Castle Hringoth.

"The sea is not the safest place," muttered Xry. "Especially now."

"We'll have to trust that the navigators and people like Arma Commanders know what they're doing."

Xry nodded, though she looked resigned. Eursale had yet to figure out why her maid bothered worrying so much about her safety. It seemed to be more than her being Princess of Cipt.

* * *

Eursale stirred only after a rough shaking. Sleepily she stretched, vaguely taking in the pounding of booted footsteps on the ship's planks. Most of the journey over the sea had been rough. That night was the first the waters hadn't unsettled her stomach so much.

"What is it, Xry? Morning alrea-"

A sharp knife hovering over her neck stilled her voice.

"Morning, Highness," said the man holding the knife. His hair was clean cut and short beard trimmed, though a scar ran beside one eye. His burgundy uniform and accent marked him Dornghian.

The man was not the only one in the room. Three others stood at the doorway. Another entered. Eursale saw her maid lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, face-down. The man with the knife to her throat looked up at the new arrival.

"Officer Lamark," the newcomer began, removing his helm.

Lamark cocked his head to one side. "Batalman, is it done?"

The batalman fidgeted with his helm. Eursale kept still, or attempted to. Her hands trembled,

holding the covers. Xry wasn't moving. Eursale watched her motionless maid, desperately trying to see if she still breathed.

Lamark narrowed his eyes. "That went rather silently. Well, speak up."

"They're dead, sir."

Eursale's eyes flew to the batalman. He seemed shocked. Her heart started to pound in terror and her eyes began to tear. Dead. Who was dead?

Lamark frowned. "They gave a fight then?"

The batalman shook his head. "No, sir."

Another man spoke up, one of the three by the doorway. To Eursale, his gaze seemed heartless as he looked to Lamark. "They were warned that should one of them make a move against us or step out of line, harm would come to her."

"So what happened, batalman?" Lamark asked.

The batalman looked at his helm. "They killed themselves."

"They did what?" asked a curly-haired man standing beside the heartless-eyed one.

"After Officer Rin's warning, they drew their daggers so fast. But we were ready. Instead of attacking us, though, they thrust their points into the heart of the man next to them."

Eursale felt as though she could just slip away. Consciousness refused to leave her, however. Her guards- it had to be they whom the batalman was discussing. Those men were dead. Eursale felt her world shattering. Through bleary eyes she saw her captor glance down at her.

"Highness…" a familiar voice whispered.

Eursale almost laughed. It was Xry. She was alive.

"Prepare your mistress to leave. You are ours now," Lamark said.

The knife point left her neck, and the booted footsteps of the Dornghian soldiers echoed down the passageway. Eursale drew the covers up to her chin and wept. Xry rose from the floor, and huddled over her.

"Come, Highness. You need to dress," Xry said softly.

Eursale felt she'd just awakened from a childhood dream into a nightmare. Shame struck her suddenly and deeply. How selfishly she'd been acting. Her father had always taught her, her people came first. Hard as it was, and still trembling, Eursale pushed herself to sit up, and scrubbed away tears. Xry sat across from her, concern on her face. A small trickle of red ran down beside her ear.

"Xry…" Eursale reached out a hand toward the wound, but Xry stood. Eursale followed and began to change out of her nightgown. At least the soldiers had the decency to shut the door. She noted that a strip of land was easily visible out her cabin porthole, and gave a moment to wonder where they were before changing into a comfortable dress. Xry gathered things in a blanket and tied it closed. When they were about to leave, her maid grabbed her arm.

"Remember, Highness. You are the Princess of Cipt."

Eursale held her head high, trying to find calmness. Her hands still trembled, refusing to cooperate with her will. A numbness began to gather inside of her, and a part of her continued not to believe that this was real. Xry stayed close as they left the cabin.

* * *

The man was insane. Eursale had never heard of anything so ridiculous. Whoever heard of a man with sixty-three wives?

Lamark sat casually near her in one chair underneath a large white canvas tent, hand brushing at his beard. Eursale occupied the other chair in the tent, though she kept a rigid pose. Lamark raised an eyebrow.

"It's true, Highness," Xry said, standing beside her with a hot cup of tea. "Your father, King Earine, refused to sign an accord with Dorngh's ruler that would have made you his fifty-seventh wife at the time. When Prince Tlal, once he became ruler, also refused Chiran Pons' second attempt to wive you, Chiran Pons declared Cipt a hostile province."

Eursale stared at her maid. "Why was I not told?"

Xry looked into her tea and shrugged. "It was not important, Highness."

"So this whole ridiculous aggression is over me?"

Lamark rose both eyebrows and nodded. He'd not been such a bad captor, and treated her due her station, though now Eursale suspected it was because his chiran had wanted her to wife.

Eursale sighed and looked helplessly down at the rug. The man was insane. Sixty-three wives. Lamark's army was marching across her land as they spoke. Her people came first. She would be sixty-four.

She took a breath. "Well, you have me now. Tell your chiran I will consent to marry him, if he stops this aggression."

There. She'd said it. Xry's teacup crashed to the ground, spilling its contents. Eursale looked in surprise as her maid knelt down, hands over hers with an imploring gaze. "You musn't do that, Highness. It's not possible."

Lamark sighed. "I'm afraid your maid is right, Highness. Chiran Pons feels as though you've challenged him. He won't rest until he shows he has power, and that means taking Steppe City."

Xry jumped up and whirled to face the bearded man. "Our people won't stand for such a thing. We would never follow his rule."

Lamark turned his head to one side. "They will. He still intends to wive Princess Eursale. Besides, outright conquering of Cipt would make him several enemies he can't afford to have as such."

A man entered the tent, and removed his helm. "Officer Lamark, Prince Tlal's army is close, sir. They've sent for a parley to be convened. He wants to meet with you. He also wishes Princess Eursale to come as well, to ensure she is safe."

Lamark frowned at the man, and then nodded. "Tell him I will meet with him as the sun peaks on the morrow."

The man left and Lamark stared at Eursale. She could not read his gaze.

* * *

Men were arrayed a far cry across the open field from each other as dawn crept its way across the grass. An awning had been set up in the middle of the field. Eursale sat on a horse with Xry beside her, waiting. A small contingent of Dorngh soldiers surrounded them. Lamark rode at the head, eyeing the distant trees with suspicion. She followed his eyes, but only saw trees.

Another group of horsemen rode out at the same time from the far side of the field. Eursale recognized her half-brother riding lead on a swift black horse. He was not dressed in armor as the Dorngh were. Instead, he and his followers were adorned in the silver and white uniforms of the Sacrificers. The dongen emblem over their left breast became clearer as the two groups met.

Lamark was frowning, stretching the scar beside his eye. "It appears not even now do they take the chiran seriously," Erusale heard him murmur.

They reached the awning and dismounted. The Dorngh spread out to cover any open portions of possible attack while Tlal's guards were arrayed around him.

"You must trust greatly the terms of parley, Prince Tlal," Lamark said when they met under

the awning.

Her half-brother was searching her with his eyes. "You are well, sister? You have not come to harm in any way?"

"No." Eursale shook her head. "They have treated me kindly."

Tlal looked down and sighed with relief, scrubbing a hand through his wheat-colored hair.

"Why have you called this parley? You must know it is too late to bargain your sister to us. The chiran will accept nothing less than the surrender of Steppe City."

Tlal stared at Lamark, a coldness entering his eyes. "The other provinces will not take kindly to your holding the ruler of Cipt hostage." He held out his hand and one of the guards behind him delivered a rolled up piece of paper. "I have here accords from Binde, Spirl and Gomgden which promise war on Dorngh if the chiran continues to hold the rule of Cipt hostage. Other provinces have voiced agreement. If they let Chiran Pons kidnap rulers and ransom them for their provinces, then who only knows which one will be next?"

"The provinces then, have a misunderstanding which will be cleared up once Steppe City is taken. Yours and your father's transgression against the chiran will be made known and assurances given that no such thing occurred."

Tlal smiled at her. Such a sad smile that she began to worry.

"However," Lamark continued. "If you wish, you may acknowledge Steppe City's defeat."

Tlal sent a quick glance over his shoulder at one of the guards and nodded to his side of the field. The guard left at a dead run.

"I cannot do that. Only the ruler of Cipt can," he replied. "He goes to be certain the provinces are aware of the situation."

Lamark shifted. "Cipt's policy does not allow for abdication, Prince Tlal."

"I know." Tlal cast his eyes beyond the Dorngh officer. "Xry."

Eursale looked at Xry who appeared about to cry, but she nodded. "It shall be done, Highness," she whispered.

Lamark too turned to her maid, which was why he missed the guard behind Tlal drawing his dagger, but Eursale did not. Eursale's eyes widened in horror as her half-brother stiffened from the blade piercing his heart. He did not look surprised. Xry held onto her as her knees crumpled.

For the second time in her life, Eursale felt the numbness of shock wash over her. Blank-faced, she gazed around at the still world. Lamark's face was ashen. The guard who'd stabbed Tlal stood with the bloody blade held against his chest, blood seeping into the white and silver uniform. The other guards held a similar pose, but with clean steel. The Dorngh all appeared on edge, weapons at ready, yet they could do nothing. The men with daggers were unmoving. The attack had come from the wrong side.

Then, in a state of confusion, Eursale realized they were all looking at her. All the men with the daggers. They were waiting.

One man moved, a Dorngh batalman. "Officer Lamark." The batalman's voice sounded strained. "They're all doing that."

Lamark looked down at her, incredulity on his face. "The whole province is mad."

The men were still watching. Waiting for her, she realized. She had to compose herself. Struggling, she made herself stand. She was their ruler now.

"Well, Officer Lamark," she managed. "What will it be? War for your province from several enemies at once, or…do you let me go home and promise to leave my borders?"

That sounded good, like a ruler. It just needed a little more. "You can assure that mad chiran of yours as well that he will never have me to wife. I stand with my people and they stand with me.

Unless you wish your chiran to show his power by conquering a dead province, which the other provinces certainly won't misunderstand, I suggest you leave."

Xry jumped at her last statement, but Eursale stood resolute, though she realized that she was shaking.

* * *

Eursale peered out an old stained glass window in the topmost tower of Castle Hringoth. She could see the whole city.

"What are we doing here?" she asked Xry, looking around at the dusty, barren chamber. The roof above seemed about to cave. The copper-skinned young woman removed a book from a stone she'd pried up, and held it in her lap on the floor.

Eursale had just finished sending gratitudes to the provinces that had offered their support and assured them that the chiran did not still threaten her province. Xry had dragged her up right after she'd signed them. Eursale had welcomed the distraction. It had kept her from dwelling on the dead.

"Do you recall much of Cipt's history?" her maid asked.

Eursale gave her a look. "You had it forced into my head enough."

Xry returned her look. "And?"

Eursale sighed and took a seat across from her. "Cipt was founded by a small band of villagers. The first king was Crintof the Foreseer, who built the foundations of Steppe City. His successor, Mivinger, had the castle built and expanded the borders. There were several skirmishes here and there, but the next major event was the Zinderian Plague. It nearly wiped out the entire populace of Cipt. The whole province was quarantined. Mimsor was the only survivor of the royal family, and became queen."

"Do you know how she survived?"

Eursale furrowed her brows.

"It is time you know," Xry said. "You notice those that have died for you. It is because of this, because of Mimsor."

Xry had her attention, and curiosity.

"The plague was cureless, a magic strike from a neighboring province. Mimsor was kept in this tower by the court adviser, Rosaran, to protect her from illness. Her enforced solitude spared her the plague, but she could not stand to see her people suffer. To know she survived while they did not. This is Rosaran's journal."

Xry tapped the book in her hands.

"He devised a way to save the people, but it required a sacrifice from Mimsor. She had to be cursed. So he cursed her to be able to bear only one child. Her descendants still carry that curse- they can only have one child, living. In return Rosaran was able to cure the people by tying their health to hers. But it did more than that. Now all the people and their descendants are tied to Mimsor by life."

Eursale felt goose bumps prickle her skin.

"Eursale, you are Mimsor's descendant. The lives of every descendant from Mimsor's time are tied to you. You die, they die. Your line dies, they die."

Xry sighed. "That is why the Sacrificers were formed. Mimsor's son, Bivlar, had a child who was crippled after an accident. That child was killed so that another who could carry on the line could take his place. That is how I know. At that point, Rosaran ensured we would not forget. That is why your guards died. None would lose everyone they'd ever known by allowing themselves to be

the cause of your death. That is why Tlal died."

Eursale felt queazy. "But, he was my brother."

"Half-brother," Xry corrected. "Your mother was the direct descendant of Mimsor. Tlal knew what was at stake. That's why he saw to keep you safe, no matter…"

Her maid stared down at the book then cast her teal eyes at Eursale. "It is not uncommon for Chiran Pons' wives to end up dead. The province could not let you go. Your people need you."

Eursale nodded absently, stunned at the revelation. "How many know?"

Xry softened her gaze. "Not all, but enough so that it will not be forgotten."

Eursale stood and stared out the colored panes of the stained glass window at the city below. Truly, her city. She felt a whole new set of burdens fell on her, but somehow the knowledge seemed to temper it. At least she understood, and that was a start.

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 16
to the monitor from which it had been sent.

All of this took less time than it had taken Stevie Phillips to go and pick up the can he had kicked into the corner. The initial surge of excitement had been tempered and replaced by a gnawing feeling that it was all a mistake. After all, it had been seven years – seven! – since the Antarctic post had received any real, useful telemetry. This was probably just going to be another malfunction, another probe to be replaced the next time one of the ESI survey ships went out that way…

But when he sat down and saw the trace program had pinpointed the origin of the flash-traffic alert, he felt butterflies in his stomach. His finger was shaking as he tapped the enter command. The flashing alert vanished, replaced by a star map of the Linara Sector. Up in the top left corner, a single star was flashing. Stevie took one look at the name next to it and picked up the phone.

This was no mistake.

* * *

"The planet Dante."

Maxwell Griffin watched himself in the screen that hovered before him, seeing his finger pointed towards the huge red planet that had been transposed in the air above. He tried to determine whether he liked what he saw. Would he be making the right impression? He was good-looking in a way, in good physical condition. Would they be able to tell he was in his mid-fifties? After all, he looked no more than thirty. His grey suit was fashionable but not too impressive, nor was his simple, yet elegant black tie. He looked like a man on a mission, a man with a goal. Now all he had to do was accomplish that goal.

"Surveyed in the 2050's by the survey ship Galileo, it is located in the Lenara sector, star quad LZ346."

The holograms above him dissolved and resolved to show a star chart, with the name Dante highlighted in the top corner, before returning to a close-up of the planet.

"The Galileo survey team decided that the planet was unsuitable for Project Prometheus. Though terraforming is a viable solution for many uninhabitable worlds, Dante was a world in the thrall of massive geological disturbances. The planetary core was going through severe metallurgical and tectonic changes, and the planet's magnetic field had developed grave irregularities. Quite literally," – he pushed a button to show a planet imploding – "Dante was tearing itself apart."

"Was?" Dr. William Simms, Director of Xenobiology in the ESI and a high ranking member of the group of men before him, the Operations Management Directorate.

"Yes." The screen changed at another push of the button, this time showing the telemetry from an AtSatt-23 class probe. "At 3:15A.M., two days ago, the Dyer V2 Satt left in orbit of Dante by the Galileo expedition relayed telemetry showing a new shift in the core temperature and a stabilising effect on the magnetic field. One could say that, as the old adage goes, Hell has frozen over."

"Dr. Griffin, we all appreciate the lecture, but why should this interest us?"

Griffin recognised the voice of Professor Adam Marx, currently the head of the Ops Management Directorate and one of Elim Walker's greatest rivals for control of the Institute. He was also one of the Directorate coven that violently opposed private companies having any part in space exploration and colonisation. Griffin hated the man. But he gritted his teeth and went on.

"A year ago, I came before this panel and asked for your help to develop the Gaia device. I promised you that it would be able to make worlds like Dante liveable for human beings. Any and all geological disturbances, difficulties in terms of geomagnetic or even core planetary instabilities could be solved. You rejected me."

"And?"

"A month later, I bought the planet Dante from the current owners, a group of entrepreneurs from Japan. I managed to establish my own corporation and to get private backing for the Gaia device. I have come here to tell you today, that I succeeded. That Gaia Corps has succeeded. And Dante is the proof."

The room erupted as hands flew up and some of the finest minds in the scientific world cried out for more information, for schematics and more importantly, bayed for Maxwell Griffin's blood. Hidden in the shadows created by the screen, Max Griffin smiled. He knew they couldn't touch him and they knew it too. He had gone behind their backs, he had done what many had tried to do and failed. But he had succeeded. He had them by the scruff of the neck. Now it was time to shake.

* * *

Outside ESI Headquarters in Houston, Texas, Maxwell Griffin breathed a sigh of relief. He'd done it. After seeing the telemetry again, after watching the experiment take place on Dante, after going over the schematics again and again, they finally admitted they were beaten. The Directors and Heads of Staff of one of the finest scientific institutes in the Earth's history, a group of the most powerful men in the World Government, had promised him everything he wanted. All the funds he needed to carry on testing of the Gaia device. A grant, and a seat at the next general meeting of the ESI. And, possibly, a directorship of his own division. After all, the Gaia device would soon revolutionise the colonisation process.

He stood for a moment, savouring the feeling of triumph, of victory. The great skyline of Houston, considered one of the finest in the world, blazed in the sun. The reflections of a thousand windows, each one a different shade of green and blue, were a testimony to humanity's desire to challenge the gods themselves. Buildings that rose into the sky above, clawing at the boundaries of the heavens themselves, just as man had always done since the time of Babel. But, Max considered, his generation had done it. They had challenged the celestial and they had won. That was the true nature of the Gaia device. With it, mankind could truly rule the heavens themselves. No planet was beyond them now.

At the bottom of the steps that led up to the Alexander B. Williams Building, Max's butler, David Townsend, stood by the open door to Max's white Ford-Limousine. Max had imported the car and the butler from England when he first established Gaia Corps, nigh on a year ago now. Ever since Genesis Inc. had 'created' the pleasure planet of Fantasium - 'A world where dreams and realities can be realised, where the cartoons of yesteryear become true life flesh and blood creations, courtesy of those wonderful people at Genesis Inc. Children must be five years old or more to attend.' - terraforming had become big business. Everyone was trying to get the edge on the competition, a new edge on what had become old technology. It was the only way to get that all-important grant from the ESI, without which any business was finished before it began. But Max was now certain that the Gaia device would do just that. All he had to do was prove that once and for all to the Institute.

"A productive meeting, sir?" David asked, as Max stepped into the confines of the backseat.

His employer raised an eyebrow and smiled. "You could say that, David, yes."

"Very good, sir."

Once the door was closed, Max sat back and loosened his tie, relaxing into the plush leather seats. It had been a gruelling six months and his nerves were frayed. Once the ESI had refused him a grant to carry on his experiments, he had been certain that his career was over. Most people only got one chance to prove themselves to the Board, and if they blew that… But he hadn't been ready to give

up. He had done the unthinkable, and gone behind the Board's back.

The Institute kept a tight leash on all of their interests, especially the big money issues of terraforming and colonisation. The baby-boom that followed the Third World War was beyond anything any sociologist or historian had been able to imagine. And it hadn't ended quickly. Soon, the Earth was overcrowded. Like a city under siege, the entire planet became a place ripe for disease and famine. Something had to be done.

So the ESI was formed. Its goal was to bring mankind out of the shadows and dust left by the early 21st century into a new and hopefully glorious age. Its means? Colonisation. Space travel became popular again, the stars became the new destination. Using lightspeed drives at first, then drone ships that could travel at many multiples of lightspeed, and finally by laying down Krasnikov Tubes with those ships, they created a network of artificial wormholes that future vessels could travel through. Terraforming, forever a theory until then, was taken from the drawing board and placed into the hands of those who could use it. The ESI made billions upon billions of world credits, and mankind survived another Dark Age.

But the power that the Institute now possessed had made them paranoid. No one was allowed to go over their heads. Max and his company had. It was illegal, true, and dangerous as well. He would have been lucky even to face trial if the ESI had gotten word of his tests before they were a success. Most people who crossed the Institute wound up dead, one way or another. But the benefits… The Gaia device was now an assured success and Max had proven that nothing was beyond man's reach. Not even the ESI could stand in their way. The most disturbed planets, the worst geological catastrophes; they could all be tamed using the Gaia device. With it, Gaia Corps and Maxwell Griffin would be able to open up new vistas in space colonisation. If the first experiment was a success…

Pushing a button on his armrest, Max opened a line to his office in New Washington. As he waited for Janie, his secretary, to answer, he realised what a dangerous game he was playing. Because there was one important part of the Dante test that he had failed to apprise the Board of…

A female voice answered his call.

"Gaia Corps, how may I help you?"

"Janie, it's me."

"Mr. Griffin? Why didn't you use the personal number?"

"Too risky at the moment. Patch me through to Comm Satt Ops, please."

"Yes, Mr. Griffin." She sounded flustered.

Moments later a male voice replaced hers on the line.

"Al here."

"Al, it's Max. Any news?"

"No, sir, Mr. Griffin. Not yet."

Max sighed and his elation drained away. It had been two days since they had received any news from the Dante team, though they were supposed to contact the base headquarters every five hours. Though everyone told him he was making too much of it, Max couldn't hold back a gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach that something had gone wrong. He was worried. If they didn't contact him, there was no way he could contact them. It was too risky to use anything but the specially encrypted satellites that the team had with them, and they had the only encryption codes.

He sighed again. The second team was on route now, and should be there within two days. John Jackson was a fine captain and Dr. Jeremiah Smith was one of the best on Gaia Corp's payroll. Max would just have to hope, and wait.

"Ok Al, thanks anyway. Contact me if you hear anything."

"Yes, sir."
"Oh, and Al?"
"Yes, sir?"
"Keep it quiet?"
"Of course, sir."

A click signalled that the line had been closed. Max sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers, tapping both forefingers against his lips, the way he always did when nervous or excited. Today, he couldn't quite decide which he was. There was so much at stake… This could be a big problem.

* * *

The privately-owned frigate Freya sped through the Dante K-Tube, using the time tunnel created by the Galileo to traverse the distance to Dante. Using the tube negated the effects of relativity, preventing the ship from returning home 362 years after they had left. Her lightspeed drives throbbed continuously, creating a heartbeat sound that could be heard throughout the ship's cigar-shaped hull.

In the ship's compact flight deck, Captain Jonathan Jackson spared a glance for Dr. Smith, one of the fathers of terraforming. Smith had been part of Project Prometheus and he had taken part in the terraforming of Venus and Mars, back in the days when the ESI was still trying to become the 21st century's answer to the United Nations. He was a living legend, a huge figure of man, a scientist who didn't mind getting his hands dirty in the dust and grime of a new planet. His wavy, thinning white hair and close-shaven beard gave him the appearance of a druid from ancient times. How Maxwell Griffin had convinced him to become part of Gaia Corps Jackson would never know, but he was glad to have him along.

However, now Smith was fidgeting in his chair, his eyes darting from side to side, but always coming to rest on the communication's panel. It had now been five days since the Dante team contacted anyone, and even the Freya's long range sensors hadn't been able to pick anything up from the compound on the planet's surface. It looked like only time would tell, now.

"Captain, we're entering the Dante system," reported Ling May, Jackson's Chinese second officer from her seat beside him. The three were alone on the flight deck, squashed into the bulbous head at the end of the Freya's hull.

"OK, May. Bring us to course 5-9-0 and drop us out of the tube. Then bring the thrusters on-line. Let's take a look as we go in."

The forward screen had been bathed with the white nothingness of the K-Tube, but now it dissolved and revolved into a standard star-screen, broken on one side by the sphere of the planet Dante. The only planet in the entire star system, Dante was a broken shell. It looked a little like Mars, Jackson thought, and was apparently affected by the same kind of storms. However, the magnetic storms here were also whipped by plasma winds from the deposits in the poles. It gave the surface a queer green glow that sent shivers down Jackson's spine. He understood now why the Galileo expedition had named the planet Dante. If anything looked like Hell, this did.

The flows of magma on the surface had coalesced into a new crust over the planet's core. Where the lava had erupted into space, a new ring of asteroids was also forming. Those asteroids would make quite a sight from the surface as soon as the more traditional terraforming devices did their job.

As May brought the Freya in towards a standard orbital position, Jackson tapped the

communication's panel. He had hoped to receive a message from the Dante team along the tube line but the silence that had reigned for the past few weeks had not been lifted.

"Anything?" Smith asked from behind him.

"Nothing," Jackson responded. He flicked a switch, waited a moment, then shook his head. "There's no answer from the compound."

He pushed a few buttons, connecting with the satellite imagers in orbit, bringing up a surface shot of the compound. Its wide dome covered about 15 square kilometres. It was built to withstand the surface conditions, and the land beneath it had been terraformed by a Houdini device before the team had landed. It looked secure. The team shouldn't be having any problems responding.

"Captain, sensors."

Jackson pushed a button on his console, opening a comm line to his sensor officer down in the sonar room.

"What is it Ben?"

"John, the sensors aren't picking up anything unusual about the compound, except…"

"What?"

"There don't appear to be any life signs down there, sir."

Neither man spoke. Neither knew what to say. This was their worst nightmare. Most of them were under the payroll of Gaia Corps; they all knew what would happen if the Gaia device wasn't a success.

"All right then." He took a deep breath, letting it out in a rush of exhaled air. "Something must have gone wrong down there. Control, weapons. Declan, meet us at the docking ring. May, keep us in orbit, and get the officers together in the briefing room in one hour. We should be back by then. Doctor, if you would come with me?"

* * *

Declan Willow, Jackson's chief armsmaster and head of security, was the first out of the shuttle Typhon and into the compound. Wearing the latest in armour from Stat Industries, he stalked off the landing platform like a hunting cat, two guns raised as he swept the corridor, looking for any possible enemies.

Jackson watched his head of security scour the entranceway to the dome before following him off of the shuttle. The chrome corridors glistened in the flickering lights; Jackson wondered what had happened for the supposedly indestructible Lifestyle engines to be playing up. The thought caused him to shiver. What could have happened here?

He remembered a rescue mission he had run to a moon in orbit of Terra Nuevo, one of the first human colonies set up outside the Magellan spiral. The planet had been believed to be Earth compatible, a lush world that seemed to thrive with life. But when the rescue team had arrived, they had found the entire team dead, slaughtered by one of the indigenous life forms. Jackson's stomach still roiled when he thought about what he had seen that day, moving slowly through the massacre, feeling like the last survivor in a battle zone.

But that can't have happened here, Jackson reminded himself. There aren't any indigenous life forms. The survey was certain… Nothing can live here…

He allowed Declan to lead them through the corridors. The security man stopped every so often as they heard something skitter across the stone flooring. And every single time he called them forward almost immediately, showing them a fallen chair or a sputtering electrical wire to explain the sound. Jackson was dreading the time when it would be more than just a misplaced book falling off a

table.

Within minutes, the crew had reached the compound's control room. Jackson was astonished to see that the door had been sealed shut by a laser blast. The control panel looked like it had been ripped off the wall.

Jackson was debating what to do when an alarm began to sound through the base.

"There's been a breach," Declan cried over the resounding shriek of the warning system. "We have to get inside."

He pushed Jackson out of the way, and lifted one of his laser guns to his shoulder. Taking aim at the sealant around the door he fired a long burst, breaking the seal enough to be able to push one of the doors open. He herded Jackson, Winona, and the Doc into the control room, then pulled the door shut again.

Jackson helped him out, keeping the door closed while Dec sealed it again with another pistol from his wide array of weapons. The shrill sound of the alarm was somewhat muted in the control room, and the power seemed to be working much better than it had been outside.

Though Jackson took the time to survey the damage, Declan hurried over to the computer consoles. It looked like there had been some kind of fight. Laser burns pockmarked the walls at regular intervals, and struts had been blasted from the ceiling. Dust covered the floor, broken every so often by mangled pieces of metal. The air had a metallic tinge to it, as if from heated laser shoot-out. Jackson felt like he had walked into a holo-movie, something out of the modern westerns that had been so popular in Hollywood a decade before. What had happened here?

"Captain, I have a link up with the cameras set up outside."

The three went over to join Declan at the control panel. Images flicked across the view screens, telemetry from the many holodevices that the team had set up around the compound.

Cameras had been placed at various intervals in the mountains and valleys near the compound. Jackson knew the drill; probe droids, their appendages like a spider's legs, would have been sent out to place them at strategic locations, linking them with the compound's satt dish, and uplinking them with the comm satellites that had been placed in orbit. However, Jackson also knew that that uplink had never been completed: the telemetry from the cameras had never reached Earth.

Declan began cycling through the cameras and Jackson stood behind him, looking for something, anything that might give them a clue as to what had happened here. The landscape was alien yet familiar, reminding him of the Mars wastelands, and yet so different as to almost deny the resemblance. It was a queer sensation, like looking into a mirror only to see a scar on your reflection that doesn't exist on your own face. Jackson shook his head, concentrating instead on checking off the different locations as the computer blinked on and off… Mountain, valley, mountain, mountain, valley, gorge, plain, rock face, cliff, valley, valley, valley…

He caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. Taking a sharp intake of breath, he stopped Declan, one hand on the military man's shoulder.

"Back. Go back two cameras."

The armoury master looked at his captain dubiously. Jackson could understand the look. After all, Dec was a GenHom, a genetically enhanced member of society, designed for combat. His eyesight was infallible. Jackson was just a normal biped. Nevertheless he was sure of what he had seen. Declan grunted and cycled back.

"There," Jackson said, pointing to the screen. Sure enough, they could see two figures, involved in some kind of scuffle. For a moment, Jackson's heart lifted. The team was safe. They had just gone out to do a field study… He gaped. That was impossible. The atmosphere out there was still filled with deadly gases. The winds that whipped down through those torturous valleys were hotter

than inside a volcano. Nothing could survive.

"Zoom in."

Dec nodded, manipulating the console and bringing the camera panning in on the two figures. They were definitely fighting, wrestling each other to the ground. The camera's microphone picked up the distant sound of screaming as one of the figures got the upper hand, beating his opponent's head into the ground with brutal force.

They were not human, that much Jackson could see, though they were humanoid. Their hairy arms and hands offset scaly skin, hardened by the winds. Their faces were turned away from camera, so the captain couldn't tell what their features were like. They were wearing some kind of covering; Jackson wondered if that meant there were other creatures living here. He started to feel excited again. This could be a major breakthrough for the scientific community. Creatures that could live in the horrific conditions on this world… Amazing.

"Captain," gasped Doc.

Jackson looked at the old man. The scientist seemed petrified by something he saw on the screen. John turned back and felt his heart miss a beat.

The clothing that the creatures wore was not the skin of some weird Dantean animal, as John had at first suspected, but rather the white lab-coats of the expedition scientists. The camera was close enough now to make out the Gaia Corps symbol on the back of the right shoulder.

"They killed them," Declan murmured, teeth gritted together.

John Jackson could only shake his head. He had a horrible feeling, a sense of what had happened. He just couldn't express it in words; to validate it like that might just mean that it would come true.

Then one of the figures turned and Jackson knew that he couldn't deny it. The face was scarred, just beginning to develop the scales that would soon cover its entire body. But the transformation was not complete. The features were still recognisably human.

"Doctor Wills."

Jackson didn't even glance at the Doc. "You know him?"

The Doc nodded, swallowing fiercely. John had to do the same, to prevent himself from throwing up.

"Yes. He was the leader of the expedition."

"What are you talking about?" Declan demanded. "You mean to tell me that that is a member of the expedition? How? Why?"

Before Jackson could answer him, the computer blinked off, followed moments later by the lights. Declan shouted, Jackson fumbled for the gun that lay in his side holster. A shrieking filled the control room, echoing off the walls, increasing in pitch and intensity the longer it went on, until Jackson fell to his knees, holding his ears in an attempt to prevent the sound from shattering his eardrums. The door to the control room burst open and a fierce wind, hot as a furnace, whipped past them, blowing them all to the ground.

John Jackson screamed.

Then he saw the glowing figures enter the control room. He whimpered as they turned, surveying the chamber. Their eyes fell on Jackson, seeming to bore into his brain. The larger of the figures lifted his hand and pointed a finger at John. Pain doubled him over and he screamed. Then, mercifully, he slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

Newsnet Special Report
2100 GST 31st June 2093
AT 2100 hours today, Gaia Corporation, the terraforming enterprise formed and led by scientist Maxwell Griffin, announced the closure of its offices. Gaia Corps has been severely criticised recently over its refusal to acknowledge or explain the disappearance of a number of its scientists a few weeks ago.
Maxwell Griffin refused to comment.

* * *

Newsnet Special Report
0900 GST 1st July 2093
AT 0830 this morning, Gaia Corporation CEO Maxwell Griffin was caught trying to escape the planet in a passenger transport headed for the Outer Rim worlds. He has been remaindered in custody by the authorities until a suitable hearing can be arranged.

* * *

Newsnet Special Report
1400 GST 3rd July 2093
AT 1400 hours today, the World Government, with the full support and backing of the Council of Allied Worlds, called upon Gaia Corps to explain its actions in what is rapidly becoming known as the Dante Gate Affair. Dr. Maxwell Griffin, the reclusive scientist and former CEO of Gaia Corps, has once again refused to comment.
The World Government has called for a hearing on the Dante Affair in two weeks time.
In related news, the ESI has reclaimed the rights to the planet Dante and has closed it off to all commercial traffic.

* * *

Newsnet Special Report
1200 GST 14th August 2093
AT 1200 hours today, the special commission investigating the Gaia Corporation and the Dante Affair indicted Dr. Maxwell Griffin for five counts of fraud, twenty-three counts of manslaughter and one count of obstruction of justice. Dr. Griffin will be facing three life sentences at a penal colony in an unnamed sector.

* * *

Newsnet Warning Alert Flash Traffic
0100 20th August 2093
Alert to all Allied Systems.
Maxwell Griffin, the scientist responsible for the deaths of over twenty-five scientists earlier this year, has escaped from prison in the Devada Sector. Be warned, he is armed and dangerous. Latest reports suggest that he commandeered a vessel. All units be on the alert.
Alert to all Allied Systems.

Maxwell Griffin…

* * *

"They'll find you, you know."

Max Griffin couldn't believe what was happening, what he was doing. A few months ago, he had been on the verge of beginning what should have been the finest chapter in his life. He should be at home, watching the money pile into his bank accounts scattered across the Allied Worlds. Instead, he was in the back seat of a tiny trade freighter, a gun in his hand, on his way to the planet that should have been his greatest triumph.

He spared a glance for the woman he had taken hostage. She was quite beautiful. Her eyes were filled with a fire he hadn't seen for a long time. The few women in the prison fortress on Kilimandjaro had had the fire beaten out of them. Enya, though, was filled with that fire. It resonated from her, a breath of fresh air in his cold, dark world. At any other time, in any other circumstances, he would probably be offering to buy her dinner. It was just one more proof of how low he had fallen that instead of that, he was holding a gun to her slim, swan-like neck, and forcing her to increase speed.

His world had been turned upside down once he lost contact with the Freya. In one swoop he lost his finest ship, his most accomplished crew, and one of the legends of terraforming. In one fell swoop. They had tried to make contact, tried everything short of sending out a team to investigate what had happened. By the time they actually began planning a mission, the truth was out, and the ESI was on his tail.

He had tried to escape. The night after that first report went out on the Newsnet, the very thing he had been dreading for months actually happened. The ESI sent a bounty hunter after him. Max never knew his name or how much he had been paid. In the scuffle, Max's butler was murdered, taking Max's place in order to save him. He remembered how scared he had been. The sight of blood had curdled his heart and sent shivers down his spine. The memory still did. He fled before the bounty hunter could realise that he had killed the wrong man, fled to the spaceport and gotten on the first ship he found. That had been a mistake, he realised in hindsight.

Things went downhill from there. He was kept in a low security facility until the hearing. The prison was so much like a hotel and his lawyers – the best money could buy – were so positive, Max really believed he might get off.

He had been so wrong.

The ESI put the pressure on the World Government and – as usual – the Government folded. Gaia Corps was put up for sale, Max's funds dried up, his lawyers left him, and Dante was sold to the Institute, along with all the Gaia research. The hearing was hushed up, the details kept off the Newsnet, which was owned by the Institute anyway. Now the ESI had the Gaia device, they had Dante… But they wouldn't have Max, he vowed silently. He was going to find out once and for all what had happened on that planet. Then… Well, there was never a good time to die, but he could think of worse ones.

He realised belatedly that Enya had said something to him. Something about finding him.

"Yes, you're right," he said.

His pilot started, looking at him warily. He must have been out of it a lot longer than he thought.

"What?"

"You're right. That they'll find me. They're probably after me right now."

"Then why...?"

"Why do this? Why take you hostage?"

Enya nodded.

"Because I can't live with the mystery anymore. I have to know once and for all what happened. I need to know why my life has been destroyed. Then, they can do what they want with me."

She seemed about to say something, but was cut off by the sound of an alarm. Max started, thinking the ESI had found him. Instead, Enya flicked a switch and they fell out of the Tube. The stars revolved for a moment, then resolved into the field around Dante. The planet itself appeared vast in their viewscreen.

"There it is," Enya said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "Your Holy Grail. What a dump."

"Dante," Max breathed, savouring the word. He had seen it a thousand times on the holoscreen, had pictured it in his dreams. Most of those dreams involved the planet once it had been terraformed, once it was a paradise like Eden. But he realised now, as they hovered above its pole, that it had a beauty all of its own. My Holy Grail.

Another light started to flash on Enya's board. She did a double take when she saw which console it was, then looked at Max, wide-eyed.

"Someone's hailing us."

"A ship?" Max asked, his heart sinking.

"No. It's coming from the planet."

* * *

The process had taken many weeks to be complete. In that time, Dr. Smith killed himself, and Declan convinced the ship to land. Now the entire crew was changed, transformed by the mysterious aliens who had caught them in the control room. They all felt at peace now, joined as they were with each other, with their saviours and with the planet itself. It was a weird symbiotic relationship, unlike anything John Jackson had ever felt or even imagined.

To his surprise, he remained himself despite the changes. He could still remember his life before, though sometimes it made him cringe to think how he had been. His life had been one mission after another, a willing part of the universal system that had destroyed so many eco-systems. A cog in the unstoppable machine that was mankind's greed. Their search for new worlds, their outreaching tendrils, had submerged thousands of planets to their own needs. He was only just beginning to understand how wrong they had been.

They soon got on with their life, enjoying their new closeness, but also their new abilities and knowledge. The Changers, who the humans had taken to calling the Gaians, were massively advanced. They were technological, but also spiritual, mechanical but also physical. They loved the planet Dante for what it was, revelling in the amazing variety that was to be found there. John was beginning to discover a whole new way of thinking, a whole new way of viewing things. There was a fragile eco-system here on Dante, one that had already been adversely affected by the Gaia device. The Gaians were busy trying to change that.

John was with Isu, one of the Gaians, out by the northern ridge one day. Isu was implanting a device into the ground, one of many that were being placed at strategic locations across the surface. The aim of those devices was to reactivate the magnetic fields that had been altered by the Gaia device, so as to return the balance that had been destroyed.

Isu was explaining how the device worked. She – or he, John couldn't be sure – was passionate about her work. Her whole face, though the glowing made it difficult to look at it directly, became animated. Her species seemed to be multiphasic, parts of her body passing in and out of John's own space-time continuum. But when she was explaining her devices, her entire face remained in that moment, her entire will, her whole being concentrated on the now.

John had some difficulty understanding all the technical facets of the Gaian technology, though he was getting better. Some of his crew, and most of the Dante expedition team, were taking it in like thirsty men deprived of water for a year and suddenly thrown into a swimming pool. But he listened anyway, just to see that look of rapture pass over Isu's face.

Then, suddenly, her face went blank, and the strip where her eyes should have been began to phase in and out. Then she looked down at John and smiled.

"There is another of your kind here, John. It is time we told your people our plans."

* * *

"Shall I answer it?" Enya asked, nervous all of a sudden.

Max nodded slowly. Maybe now he could find out what had happened.

The screen went black as the connection was made with the compound below. Then a face appeared on it. Enya screamed and Max felt faint. It was a human face, or what was left of it. Scales covered the features and strange growths had begun to develop on the cheeks and neck. Max had to fight to keep down the contents of his stomach. This was beyond anything he had ever seen, or had expected to see.

"Max? It's me."

The sound of that voice was too much for Max. He turned around, his stomach lurching as he vomited into the nearest receptacle, a metal rubbish bin. He dry heaved for a moment, trying not to think of what he had seen. Tears sprang to his eyes. He wiped them away, wiping his mouth on his sleeve with the same motion.

"John? Jonathan."

"Yes, Max. It's me. I know what you must be thinking, but I can explain."

"What happened to you?"

"I've been… enlightened. Changed. Transformed. My own personal Gaia, Max. Our own personal Gaians."

"What are you talking about?"

"Max, it's amazing. You… You wouldn't believe it if I told you, so…"

John Jackson stepped out of the frame. Max was about to call him back, when a glowing figure stepped into view. Max felt his mouth drop at the sight. The figure looked like what he had imagined an angel looking like as a child. He couldn't be sure whether it was a he or a she, but it was beautiful. The glowing dimmed a little, allowing Max to get a look at the body beneath. It seemed out of focus at first, and it took Max a moment to realise that the creature was phasing in and out of existence.

"What the…?" Enya breathed. Max turned to look at his hostage pilot. She seemed even more beautiful, her hair falling down over her forehead, her eyes wide with awe, her mouth rounded in a little o. The glow of the alien cast strange and wonderful reflections in her eyes.

"Maxwell Griffin?"

"Yes?"

"I am Isu. Your people call me a Gaian. The name my people have taken for themselves is too complex to explain. So, you may call me Isu."

"What have you done to Jonathan? Where are the others?"

"The other members of your race are fine, Maxwell Griffin. They are much as John is, though some are in more advanced states of the transformation."

"What do you mean?" Max demanded. "What have you done to them? If you have hurt them…"

"That is not our intention, Maxwell Griffin. Your people shall be fine. They have been… How do your people put it? Bio-formed."

"Bio-formed?"

"Yes, Maxwell Griffin. They have been transformed to suit the needs of the planet on which they reside."

"How?"

"We have the technology."

"But… But why?"

"Maxwell Griffin, my people are from many thousands of light years away. Our worlds were much like yours, gathered in a great republic that spanned fifteen of the clusters you call galaxies. We lived for music, art, and our spiritual selves. We learned to live with the galaxy and with the universal nature."

"But we soon became greedy for more worlds, for more space in which to explore and develop ourselves. So we turned to those planets that we could not reach, those worlds beyond us because of the conditions there. We began to terraform those worlds to suit our needs."

"We almost destroyed ourselves. For in our search for more worlds, for more space, we destroyed the great variety of the universal nature. We turned every world into what we wanted to do. We believed we could do better than the gods, that we could design our own universe to suit us.

"We were wrong."

"Very soon, a plague arose. It began on one planet, but soon it spread. Because, in our greed, we had turned one planet into many, transformed each world we encountered into a carbon copy of our own, the plague spread to every single world on which we lived. The disease destroyed crops and animals, reducing every world to a barren wasteland."

"Famine was rampant, diseases spread, and our people were almost wiped out. At one time we were a great race, our numbers rose into the millions of billions. Now, there are barely a million of us left."

The sadness in her voice was catching. Max felt his throat constricting and he blinked back tears. Enya was crying freely. Isu's open emotion was heart-rending as was her tale.

"That is why we are here."

"What?"

"We will not let you make the same mistakes we did. That is why your people have been bioformed. In our ships, we have the technology to return every planet to its original state. Every world you have terraformed, every continent you have transformed, will be returned to its natural glory. The Universal Balance must be restored, or you risk the same fate we suffered."

"By what right do you do this?" Max exclaimed, angrily.

"By what right do you transform planets and destroy entire eco-systems for your own greed?" Isu demanded, her eyes blazing. Max fell silent.

"I am not here to discuss this with you, Maxwell Griffin. I am here to tell you what is to be, and to ask you to do something for me."

"What?"

"Return to your people. Warn them. Tell them that we are coming. All those who do not wish

to be bio-formed should return to the un-terraformed planets. They should remain there. Any and all who are still on one of the terraformed worlds when we arrive will be bio-formed to suit the ecological needs of the planet and the eco-system. That is what you should tell them."

"But…?"

"No, Maxwell Griffin. I cannot talk to you anymore. There is much work to be done here and much work to be done out there." Her hand encompassed the stars above her head. "Go, and do what I have asked you. Warn your people. We are coming."

The screen fell dead. Max sat back in his chair, mind-boggled by the revelations that Isu had made. He could understand what she was saying, and the implications were astounding. He tried to understand it all himself, but gave up after a moment. Turning his head slightly, he saw Enya looking at him.

"So?" the pilot asked.

"So, we do what she says," Max said firmly.

For the first time, Enya smiled and her face lit up like the glow of the alien below. Turning her head back to her controls, she brought the ship around and headed out into deeper space. As the stars whirled together and joined into a single tube of light that opened like a flower's petals into the purple tunnel of x-space, Max wondered what he would say to the ESI, how he would convince him of what he said. What would they do? Would they accept the Gaians' warning, and evacuate those who didn't want to leave? Would they try to stand and fight? Would they want to launch a pre-emptive strike? He didn't know. He hoped they would take the Gaians' word at face value; he got the feeling that behind Isu's spiritually enlightened exterior beat the heart of a warrior. A war between humans and Gaians would probably go very badly for the humans.

As the ship vanished, he decided not to worry about it. Whatever happened, they were coming. Who knew, maybe he could make a deal with them? Now, what would the ESI pay for a real Gaian device…?

The End

Leave a message for this story.

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and has been carried by a long succession of fighting men since then. He also told me it carries a special power. He said that it can inflict mortal wounds upon otherwise immortal beings, or upon mortals protected by sorcery.

"He gave it to me and told me to keep it close, because I was going to need it soon. I didn't believe him, but I didn't tell him that. I thanked him for his gift. I put it away and forgot about it.

"My next job was with an escort for a Thurassian princess going to marry the heir-apparent to the crown of one of the mountain kingdoms. An ice-ogre attacked us on the Kshashan Pass. It killed half the escort and didn't intend to stop until it had killed us all, including the princess.

"I don't know what you know about ogres, but here's something to remember--trying to cut one with an ordinary sword is like trying to cut granite. You're a lot more likely to shatter your blade than to do anything more than scratch the ogre.

"I remembered the bronze sword. I didn't think it would do any good against that creature, but I also thought I was going to die anyway, and had nothing to lose by trying it. To my surprise, the bronze blade bit into the ogre as easily as steel bites into ordinary flesh. I killed it."

Kelan said, "That's pretty impressive."

"I suppose so. But here's the important part of my story, lad. The easterling who gave me the sword told me I would know the right time to use it. I knew, when I saw the ogre. He said I'd know when I was done with the sword. I knew I wouldn't need it any more, after I'd killed the ogre. And he said I should keep the sword close at hand after that, because one day I'd see a man, and know he was going to need the bronze sword soon. The easterling said I should give the sword to that man, and tell him about it.

"It's you, Kelan. One day soon, you're going to need the bronze sword. Carry it with you until you need it. Use it until your task is done, then keep it somewhere within reach. When you see the man who will need it after you, you'll recognize him. Give it to him and tell him what it is, the way I just told you."

* * *

It took Kelan another month and a half to reach his destination. When he got there, he wondered if he'd arrived years too late. Castle Coronath was a ruin.

A couple of the towers had collapsed. In one place, the outer wall had fallen, and the stones had spilled into the weed-choked moat. The great drawbridge at the main gate had been splintered, and the massive chains that once raised and lowered it had fallen and lay in rusty heaps beside the gatehouse.

Kelan thought the castle was abandoned, but then he saw a crude bridge of logs that spanned the moat near a lesser gate. He stood at the outer end of the bridge and shouted. There was no response, so he crossed the bridge and shouted again. Again, there was no answer.

When he entered the bailey he saw a tall, gaunt old man dressed in tattered clothing approaching him from the direction of a rickety wooden shed built against the outer wall. The man had long, yellow-white hair, and a shaggy beard of the same color. His clothing had once been of high quality, but now was tattered and patched. He walked slowly, with the aid of a staff.

"Who are you?" the old man demanded. "What do you want? Why do you disturb a tired old man's rest?"

"Sir, I'm looking for Jeredric MaComamar, Baron Coronath."

"You've found him. I am Jeredric MaComamar." The old man gave a bitter laugh. "I am the baron who holds the ruined castle and fallow fields of Coronath." He glared at Kelan. "What do you

want?"

"Sir, I have come from Vendenesse Town, in Trathan, to fulfill a promise to my grandmother..."

The old man's eyebrows lifted. His face paled, as though he had just seen a ghost.

"...About forty years ago, King Aran the Tall sent an army into Trathan, to help us deal with the Mitrian invasion.

"My grandmother was a young woman at the time. She met and fell in love with a young officer in King Aran's army. When the army left, the officer, who named himself Jeredric MaComamar, swore to return if he could. He gave her a ring, and said that if he couldn't return, the ring would be the key that admitted her to Castle Coronath."

Kelan produced the ring his grandmother had given him, and handed it to the old man.

Jeredric looked at it for a several seconds. When he looked up, there were tears glistening at the corners of his eyes. "How does it go with Mirari, the beautiful daughter of Karshan the Merchant?"

"She died this last winter."

The old man bowed his head.

Kelan continued. "Just before the end she gave me the ring, and asked me to give it to you if you still lived, or place it on your grave if you did not."

The old man mumbled something that might have been, "I'm sorry, Mirari." He looked up and said, "I loved her, you know. I intended to return to her, but I took a serious wound in the fighting, and was sent home to recover. After my strength returned, my father told me--quite forcefully--that as the heir to the title of Coronath, I had to marry a woman of my own station, one selected by my family. For years, I dreamed of sending for Mirari, but..." The old man sighed. He peered closely at Kelan's face. "You have a bit of the Comamar look about you, boy."

"My grandmother gave birth to a son, my father, in the spring of the next year."

"So, you claim to be my grandson?"

"Sir, I have been told that I am the grandson of Jeredric MaComamar."

"I wish to believe it, for Mirari's sake. Come into my abode...you said your name was...?"

"Kelan, sir."

"Kelan. Enter my abode, Kelan, my new-found kinsman. I can only offer coarse bread, cheese, and wine that hasn't gone sour quite yet. You are welcome to share what I have."

* * *

After a simple meal eaten at a crude wooden table in the old man's hovel, Jeredric said, "Well now, Kelan, I suppose you are wondering why Baron Coronath, scion of the proud and ancient House of Comamar is dressed in rags and lives in a leaky shack made of scrap wood, in the courtyard of a ruined castle."

"Sir, I hadn't..."

"Of course you had, boy. I'm supposed to be a baron, but I'm living like a tramp, squatting in the ruins of a once-grand castle. You want to know why, even if you're too polite to ask."

"Sir, I don't want to cause you discomfort..."

"Discomfort? Hah! What could be worse than this?" A serious expression, thoughtfulness mixed with fear perhaps, crossed the old man's face. Then speaking softly, as though to himself, he said, "What am I saying? Of course there is something worse." He looked at Kelan and said, "Have you ever heard of a wizard named Ashu-Radan Deth?"

"No, sir."

"I wish I hadn't. I killed him. But sometimes dead wizards don't stay dead. His liege lord, the demon-god Zuraghath-Tha, allowed him to return to Earth as a vampire, to take his revenge by tormenting me. He has taken from me everything that made my life worth living. He has told me that he will not kill me until he has grown tired of watching me suffer.

"This castle was strong and beautiful. His master called forth the earthquake that reduced it to the condition you see now. Coronath was prosperous, because of its fertile land and hardworking farmers, but the vampire spread terror and death among my people. The last of them fled, years ago. I was a wealthy man, with a treasury full of gold, silver, and precious stones. Now it all sits in the dank darkness of Ashu-Radan's cave, carried off by the vampire and his half-demon aide. And, and..." The old man's voice quavered. Tears ran down his wrinkled cheeks.

"...And as for the light of my life, my darling, precious niece, Lady Leàrith NeComamar, the vampire has..." The old man broke down crying. After a bit, he brought himself under control. "The evil one has taken the dear, sweet child. When he has had enough of tormenting me, he will make her into one of his foul kind, and then he will bring her to me, for her first feeding."

Suddenly, Kelan knew why the bronze sword had come to him. He said, "Sir? May I show you something? It might have a bearing on this situation."

"I don't see how, but yes, I'll look."

Kelan unrolled the blanket-roll he carried slung over his back. He'd been carrying the old sword in its scabbard, at the center of the pack.

He held the sheathed weapon in his hand and said, "May I draw it, sir? I'd like for you to see the blade."

"Draw."

Kelan slid the blade from the scabbard, and laid it on the table. Both men were silent for several seconds. Then Jeredric said, "Dare I hope? I traveled much, as a younger man. I saw many lands, I heard many stories. There is supposed to be an old, old sword that, in the right hands, can kill things that otherwise cannot die. Dare I hope that this is that sword?"

"The man who gave it to me said he used it to kill an ice-ogre. He also said that when the right time came, I'd know what I had to do with the sword. When you told me about the vampire and your niece, I knew why it came into my hands."

The old man smiled a warrior's fierce smile. "There are some things you will need to know before you face Ashu-Radan Deth, my boy. Sit quietly and listen..."

* * *

The earthquake that ruined Castle Coronath had also changed the course of a brook that once flowed through a meadow several miles from the castle. The brook had spilled out of its bed and turned the meadow into a bog. It surrounded the hill with the vampire's cave, and within it Baron Coronath's stolen treasure. Even more importantly, Lady Leàrith was a captive in that cave.

The old man told Kelan that the vampire slept like a corpse during the day, and that his aide, a half-demon that usually took the appearance of a very tall, immensely fat man, spent the daylight hours keeping watch from the top of the hill. Nobody could approach the hill without being seen.

The top of the hill was relatively flat, and about a hundred paces across. That meant the half-demon watchman couldn't see everything from one spot. It had to patrol the rim of the hilltop. Kelan waited until the watchman was out of sight, then started for the hill. It was summer, and the bog was as dry as it ever got.

He had picked his route carefully before starting. On one side of the hill, there was a wide,

green-scummed expanse of shallow water, bordered by a stretch of weed-grown, gray mud. The half-demon was circling the top of the hill, and would come into sight from the east, Kelan's right. He approached the hill on a path that took him close to the western edge of the pond.

The watchman came into view and saw Kelan. With a bellow that startled every bird within a mile into flight, the huge creature bounded down the hill. Kelan retreated to a position that put most of the pond between him and it.

The half-demon circled toward the west, to come around the pond. Kelan retreated, to keep as much of the water between him and it as possible. It stopped and reversed its course, to circle the pond in the other direction. Kelan changed direction, too.

They played that game for a few minutes, until the half-demon roared. It drew a pair of swords from crossed baldrics slung over its back. The slightly curved blades gleamed like polished silver in the sunlight. They were nearly as long as Kelan was tall.

The half-demon began to swing the blades in counter-rotating figures-of-eight, faster and faster until they blurred. No weapon held in human hands could get past that flashing steel. Any mortal flesh within reach of the half-demon's swords would be chopped into collops. Kelan could hear a faint whirring sound from the spinning blades.

The half-demon squatted and pulled itself further down and inward into a barrel-shaped mass, with his arms extended and the swords spinning in their figures-of-eight at its sides. Then it shot upward.

For half a heartbeat, Kelan thought the thing had merely leaped to its feet. Then he saw that it was as though some powerful force had squeezed it from all sides and had forced it into a long, thin, snake-like shape that shot upward. It arched over the pond toward him. The spinning, flashing swords drew toward each other, to form a single razor-edged band of death, bearing down upon him with appalling speed.

When the thing was almost too close, Kelan dove forward into a shoulder-roll that took him through the weed-grown mud and into the shallow water of the pond. He jumped to his feet. The snakish body of the half-demon was just above his head.

He ducked under it and splashed into the water on the other side.

When Kelan first dove into the water, the half-demon had whipped its head end into a tighter curve, down and back, toward the man. When Kelan rolled under it, it tried to follow.

One of the spinning sword blades slashed into the half-demon's own body. The monster roared in pain and outrage. It dropped into the pond, writhing like a gigantic wounded snake.

Kelan slashed at it with the bronze sword, then chopped at the same spot a second time. He completely severed it. The two halves thrashed around madly. He chopped again, and the pieces continued to writhe, but not quite so energetically.

He kept hacking the thing into shorter and shorter segments, until all the pieces lay still. He stood with the now-muddied water of the pond up to the middle of his calves, breathing heavily. He was soaked with bog-water and covered with dead-smelling, gray mud.

Suddenly, all the pieces of the half-demon twitched, made a loud, leather-on-polished-stone squeak, and jumped a couple of feet into the air. They splashed back into the water, bloating and turning black. The flesh sagged like soft jelly, then slid off the underlying bone. The bones sank, the rotting flesh floated on the muddy water. Kelan gagged and choked on the stink of corruption.

He sheathed the bronze sword and waded to dry ground. He circled around the pond to the hill and looked for the entrance to the vampire's cave. He found it about halfway up the slope, concealed behind a boulder, on the far side of the hill.

He stood just inside the mouth of the cave, with the sunlight warming his back. After

hesitating for a bit he shouted, "Lady Leàrith? Are you in here? Lady Leàrith?"

The faint sound of woman's voice echoed from the darkness. "Who are you?"

"My name is Kelan. Your uncle Jeredric sent me. I've come to take you home."

"Come to me, Kelan. I am bound."

The shaft of the cave began to descend after only a few paces. Within seconds, Kelan was in total darkness. "Lady? Where are you? I can't see a thing."

"From where you are, the shaft runs straight and level. Just keep coming. But say no more, lest we wake Ashu-Radan."

After creeping along the shaft for several minutes he whispered, "Lady Leàrith? Are you close?"

Softly, from behind him, came the words, "I am close to you. You are close to death."

The words from that unexpected direction startled him. He spun around and whipped out the bronze sword. He was further surprised to discover that when his hand held the hilt, he could see.

Everything the vampire touched had been contaminated by traces of his magic, and the sword gave Kelan the power to see those traces. There were faint, ghostly patches, and smears and streaks of hellfire-red light along the walls and the floor of the cave. A barely visible outline of a woman's figure stood a couple of paces away. Her throat was covered with a glowing red blotch, with two brighter pinpoints of red light over her life artery.

From somewhere within him came the thought, "At least the contamination hasn't yet touched her heart." He didn't know where the knowledge came from, but he knew that there was hope. She hadn't yet fed on the blood of a living human.

She leapt at him. If he had been unable to see, she would have taken him.

He dove for the floor, rolled, and jumped to his feet, facing her. She had stumbled to her knees when she missed him. She scrambled to her feet.

He couldn't kill her. Even though she had not completely transformed, she was probably far stronger than she had been before, stronger than him, and capable of seeing clearly in the dark. But he couldn't use the blade of the sword on her, not while there was a chance of saving her.

Instead of leaping, she ran at him with her arms outstretched. He dropped and kicked at her feet. She stumbled, recovered, and dove toward him as he lay on the ground.

Instinctively, he thrust the point of the bronze sword toward her throat. At the last possible instant, he was able to twist the point away. Her chin slammed into the fist he had wrapped around the hilt of the weapon.

The impact rammed his shoulder onto the stone floor hard enough to make him wonder if something had cracked. His right hand was numb, but he thought he felt blood from a split knuckle running down his wrist.

He had dropped the sword when she hit his hand. He spent several frantic seconds fumbling around until he found it. Once he held it again, he could see her lying in a crumpled heap on the floor.

He looked around. The shaft had doorways leading to small chambers off to the sides. She must have hidden in one and waited for him to pass. He saw a red glow from another doorway.

The vampire lay on a stone slab in that chamber. His entire body glowed with the hellish, red light. Kelan could see that within the body the heart glowed bright red. It was motionless, like a dead man's heart, but its light pulsated, brighter and dimmer, brighter and dimmer, in an evil parody of a living heartbeat.

The vampire stirred. Kelan lunged, and drove the point of the bronze sword into the vampire's glowing heart.

The foul creature shrieked, and tried to pull itself off the blade. Kelan jerked the weapon free, then chopped at the vampire's neck.

It took him several strokes to behead the unnatural creature. Even after the head and body were separate, the body twitched and scratched at the floor in an attempt to crawl toward the head. The severed head worked its mouth in a futile effort to speak.

Kelan kept the sword in his right hand and used two fingers of that hand to pick up the head by the hair. He used his left hand to grab an ankle, and began to drag the body toward the mouth of the cave. As he passed Lady Leàrith, he could see that she was lying on her back, twitching and shifting like an uneasy sleeper. He heard her moaning and muttering.

When Kelan got within sight of the mouth of the cave, and the sunlight streaming in, the vampire's struggles grew more frantic. He dropped the ankle and took the head to the mouth of the cave. He threw it as hard as he could.

When it was at the top of its arc, it burst into flame. Thick, black smoke trailed behind it. It hit the ground, and broke into small, burning pieces.

The headless body tried, in a feeble, uncoordinated way, to crawl into the darkness. He dragged it to the mouth of the cave and kicked it down the slope. Exposed flesh reddened, blackened, then, with a soft pop, burst into flame. He watched the body burn until it was nothing but a mound of ash and glowing embers. Then he climbed down to it and stomped the mound to pieces.

He knew he'd never need the bronze sword again. He sheathed it and went back into the cave to get his cousin, Lady Leàrith NeComamar.

* * *

She was covered in filth and her clothing was all but completely shredded. She was malnourished, battered and bruised, and sick in her soul. But she was alive. When he got her back to Castle Coronath, the old man took charge of her.

Later, Kelan and Jeredric sat at the table in the old man's hovel. Jeredric, who now carried himself and spoke like a baron in spite of the rags he still wore, said, "I am a wealthy man again, Kelan. I will spend what I must on healers, to see to my darling Leàrith's recovery. If I must spend all of what is left to restore Coronath, I will. This will be a happy and prosperous place again, thanks to you."

Kelan was unaccustomed to praise from men of rank. He flushed. "I'm glad I could help, sir."

"What will you do next, my boy?"

"I don't know, sir. I hadn't thought about it. I might go back to Vendenesse. Or I might look for a caravan that needs a man-at-arms. I've been told I handle a pole-axe well."

"I'm sure you do. The children of House Comamar are born fighters." The old man took a swallow of wine. "Stay here, Kelan. Rebuilding Coronath will take time and strength, and I am an old man, with a limited store of both."

"Sir, you may be a bit past your youth, but you are hale and fit enough to be the baron of a fine estate."

"For now. But not forever. My sons are either living lives of their own far away, or dead. There is no heir to Coronath. You are my grandson. Stay, and in time you will be known as Kelan MaComamar, Baron Coronath."

Kelan was taken aback. He was a city-dweller, a commoner and the son of an illegitimate father. Him, a baron? "Sir, I don't know what to say..."

"Then don't say anything. Instead, think about this--I call Leàrith my niece, but in truth, she's

more of a cousin. She's the granddaughter of one of my uncles. You and she share a single great-grandfather. Marriage is permitted between persons of that remote degree of kinship, you know."

Again, Kelan was taken aback. Even beneath the dirt and the bruises, he had seen the possibility of beauty in her. And if a fine and noble man like Jeredric loved her, she must be a good person. "Shouldn't we should wait to see what she thinks of that idea, sir?"

The old man smiled and said, "Yes, we should. And while we're waiting, we can start working on better quarters for the three of us."

The End

Leave a message for this story.

Continued from page 22

"But there's more," Roger went on. "Esmariah isn't paying people to mine with her gold, she's putting the gold in the mine itself. And Bray is the one who delivers it. Now when we were there, he was looking for someone. Kept calling out to them."

Croomb's fingers had begun to drum on the table. "Someone?"

"Some *thing*," said a voice from behind them. They whirled in their seats to see Ivy the baker entering noiselessly from the hall. She had a large book under her arm and thumped it down on the table. It was not as fine as any of Esmariah's books, although it was sturdily made and appeared to have weathered much. The flaking gold title said *Legends of Manking*. She flipped it open to a page marked with a tattered bit of lace, and laid a loaf of bread on the table that had been tucked up under her arm.

"Eat," she said. As they broke bread and doled it out amongst themselves, Ivy read to them.

"The shepherds of Manking, counting their heritage back hundreds of years to shore-dwelling tribesmen, tell tales of a creature that ravaged the shore line periodically. Often this creature, which they called a dragon, would not be seen for an entire generation, only to appear again suddenly. According to legend it erupted suddenly from the earth itself and would bask on the quay before disappearing into the sea, often taking a sheep or two with it. The herding tribes of old sent their shaman to lay out gifts of precious things, such as bronze weapons and anything shiny, to appease the creature's wrath. Thank you dear," she said, as Missing handed her a slice of bread. She set it aside.

"While the shaman kept vigil on the shore, their people would stand vigil in their tents, beating tribal drums in an effort to frighten away the evil spirit of the dragon. These shaman passed on the secrets of appeasing the dragons only to their own, and it was considered a great badge of honor to die while carrying out the duty of their offices," she finished, and closed the book.

"Shiny things to appease the dragon," Roger said. "Gold is shiny."

"Are you telling me," Croomb said, "that the Gasp family believes a dragon lives in its salt mine and they give it gold to keep it from taking their salt?"

You told me the thing would dig as long as I kept paying–

"No," Missing said. "They think it's digging the salt."

"And I think they're right," Roger said. "This letter says there have always been fifty years of rest–the years when there's salt. Then a year of inactivity. According to the letter, we should be right at the beginning of a year of inactivity. But for the last year the salt has become more and more scarce. Whatever was providing the salt–it's off its schedule. That's what's causing the tremors I think."

"Did it die?" Missing said.

"I wonder if it ever even existed." Croomb scowled.

"That's what we need to find out," Roger said. "Tomorrow. Before Bray takes more gold down."

"The inquiry isn't scheduled until next week," Croomb protested.

"Morwin Croomb, if you were truly a man to stand on policy, you wouldn't have left me on the dance floor thirty-two years ago to run after that drunken sot Lacinda Daily," Aunt Orangia said.

The Inquisitor blanched. "It's an abuse of my power, Orangia. There are rules. And that was a very long time ago."

"Look at it this way," Ivy said. "You can follow your rules while Manking falls down around our ears, or you can get us into that mine tomorrow night. When all is said and done, do you think you will be admired more for your patience, or your initiative?"

Four pairs of eyes regarded him carefully. Croomb took a bit of Ivy's bread, shoved it into his

mouth, and chewed.

"What exactly is it we'll be looking for down there?" he said finally.

"Dragons," Roger said.

"Lovely," Croomb muttered, taking another bit of bread and scowling. "This is why I didn't become a soldier, you know. I never liked all the sweating and bashing on armor. I just like to investigate things that have already happened."

"I have every confidence you will do splendidly," Aunt Orangia said.

Croomb looked at her, then turned away almost bashfully. "I'll try my best," he said. "Of course if I'm thrown in jail it will be all your fault."

"I'll bring you hot meals every day," Aunt Orangia said.

"Would you?" Croomb blinked. "That will be nice."

* * *

"I need to leave early today," Missing told Utter Riley. They were in the kitchen, scrubbing pots. For two people who lived alone and rarely used salt, Esmariah and Utter generated a lot of dirty dishes.

"Oh?" He raised one eyebrow.

"Yes." She lowered her voice. "It's about that business in the mines."

"Oh. Well, you're to take another message to the Sulks today. I suppose I could do without you after that. There isn't much to do here anymore, anyway."

Within the hour Esmariah called Missing into the side parlor and handed her another letter. Missing pocketed it and almost ran out of the room. That evening's activities were swirling in her mind, making her impatient for the day to end. She hurried out the door, not even realizing she viewed her visit to the Sulk house as more of an inconvenience than an opportunity.

In her wake, and carefully out of sight, Orangia slipped in through the gate of the Gasp house and marched straight up the center of the drive. She knocked on the door with a firm and determined fist, then glared down her nose at the small, bent man who answered.

"I wish you to announce me to your mistress," she said.

"Fine," he said. "Who are you?"

"Lady Orangia."

Utter Riley barely turned his head. "There's some lady here to see you!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Yes. Show her in."

* * *

The two women, each formidable in their own right, regarded one another carefully. Orangia occupied the divan, straight as a rod and with her ankles neatly crossed. Esmariah overwhelmed her chair.

The dog pattered over to Orangia and sniffed her knees, intrigued by the sudden smell of cat. It stood up, leaning against her legs. With the barest flinch, Orangia upset its balance and sent it back to the floor. It retreated to Esmariah's lap.

"What an interesting dog," Orangia said.

"Yes," the Lady Gasp replied. "Her mother tried to eat her."

Orangia raised one eyebrow.

"Dogs do that, you know. To cull the weakest from the litter. I saved her. I was curious about what was wrong with her. Turns out it was just the trembles."

To illustrate, the dog yipped and shivered.

"Has some Sealyham in her, by my eye," Orangia said.

"Yes," Esmariah said.

"My sister liked dogs," Orangia said. "Tied them up with bows and put little aprons on them."

"Silliness," Esmariah said.

Orangia nodded. "I always preferred cats."

"Ah, cats. Playful, but they have no sense of humor."

"Yes," Orangia said.

"Yes," Esmariah said.

The two women eyed one another, then smiled briefly, waiting for the show to begin.

"My sister's husband liked dogs too. Especially Sealyham terriers. He lived in Western Pressing, although he wasn't from there, you know."

"Oh? I didn't know."

"He was from Delasbourg. Small town, southern. Lots of farmers."

"Interesting."

"You know, Esmariah, I always wanted to tell you how much I admired the gown you wore the night of the north-end coming-out social."

"Thank you, Orangia. And I remember that blue suited you well."

"Nice of you to say. My sister ran off a year or two later. Met Aster. They took in a dog together."

"Childless couples often do, I've heard."

"They weren't much suited to babies, either of them, when one came along. My sister wrote me. They liked the dog better."

Esmariah shifted only slightly in her chair. Her dog looked up, waiting for instruction. Hearing none, it curled up again.

"They were quite poor, you know. Little more than tinkers. They decided to come and try their luck in Manking. Neither one of them was much suited to work, though."

Esmariah made a sympathetic noise somewhere in the cavern of her throat.

"There was an incident on the road outside Manking. Luckily Missing was unharmed, and the soldiers that found their bodies brought her to me."

Orangia dug into her pocket and drew out a well-worn note and small necklace with a curious belt-clasp. She handed it to Esmariah.

"This was the girl's only inheritance. She keeps it in a box under the bed. Thinks I don't know about the box. The soldiers did not mention the dog. I imagine it got excited and ran off somewhere. This note was pinned to her blanket."

Esmariah Gasp read the small note. Then she fingered the necklace, its leather band and cheap cut glass worn from years of handling. It was too small for any neck, even that of an infant. But it was just perfect for something else. Her dog sniffed at it curiously.

Please look out for our missing Sealyham.

Not "*watch over our*," or "*care for our*."

Look out for.

She looked at the note, the collar, and the dog, who sat up. Then Esmariah Gasp did something she hadn't done in over a year.

She laughed.

It welled up out of her lips like slow froth. Orangia, though she did not move a muscle, felt her hair curling down in the follicles of her scalp.

"Not the child's name," Esmariah said.

"No."

"They went after the dog."

"Yes. It took me a while to put the pieces together, but I dare say I figured it out before you did. I believe Missing was five years old when I did. I didn't really have any better idea for a name by then. She saw your genealogy, you know. Brought it home thinking she was some heir to a fortune. I've managed to put those thoughts to rest."

"Have you told her?"

"That her parents left her by the side of the road to go looking for their dog? Of course not. I'm fond of her."

Esmariah laughed again. Her chair shook dangerously with her mirth, but held firm. The dog became nearly crazed, leaping down and chasing its tail and yipping with frantic delight. On and on the laughter came. She laughed at the coincidence of babies in baskets, and at the rich desolation of parents who went looking for dogs. She laughed because she did not know what else to do.

"She's a fairly clever girl, Esmariah. Attentive to her duties, loyal, and hard-working. I am certain she will be of great help to you. But she cannot help you with *everything* you want. She cannot help you get a hold on the Sealyham mine. She's just a tinker's daughter."

The Lady Gasp stilled her laughter and looked at the Lady Orangia. "If she *were* a Sealyham–if I could prove it–she would be entitled to a very tidy little piece of wealth. I, of course, would oversee her interests in the mine for a small fee, and she could have the rest."

"You don't have that kind of proof."

"I'm certain if we put our heads together we could come up with some fairly convincing arguments."

Orangia met her gaze for a moment. Then she took a deep breath. "No Esmariah. It wouldn't be fair. To her, or to the Sealyhams. And if Missing ever found out, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"You would deny your niece a fortunate life for the sake of your own *pride?* Think of all the money–"

"I did. The answer is no. Missing is perfectly capable of making her own fortune, and I won't deny her the opportunity to try."

She rose and held out her hand. As Esmariah returned her belongings, a pair of old gray eyes met another pair of old gray eyes.

"We should talk like this more often, Orangia," she said.

"No need, Esmariah." Orangia tucked the note and necklace away. "I think you and I have just said all that we have to say to one another."

Then she left. Utter Riley held the door for her and watched her walk back down the drive. He did not scowl, nor mutter to himself. For some reason, the sight of the woman's retreating back, and her footprints in the gravel, did not bother him at all.

* * *

The Sulk house was unusually active. It seemed mostly full of girls. They were in the parlor and running up and down the stairs, calling out to one another in high, excited voices. Prudity

Grumm was nowhere to be seen. Titus was leaning up against one of the pillars, his arms crossed. A young lady in confectionary pink was speaking to him in a low voice. Her bosom appeared to be on the verge of a desperate escape attempt from her blouse.

"So my mother says now that I can do better than Helmsley Tinnerborn, and my parents had a horrible fight over it and now my father's taken up rooms near Weyne Street and swears he won't come back until she's come to her senses," the young woman said.

"How interesting." Titus eyed her chest, monitoring the impending liberation. He did not see Missing. She stood in the middle of the entry, shifting from foot to foot impatiently.

"Titus," she said finally. The young man and woman turned. The girl in pink eyed Missing, having to raise her head to take her in completely. Then she narrowed her eyes. Missing ignored her.

"There's another message."

"You'll excuse me a moment," he said to the girl. "Fascinating story. Can't wait to hear the rest."

"Well," the girl said. "That's all there is, really. But we could talk about something else if you like." She batted her eyelashes repeatedly.

"Don't you have a meeting to organize?" he asked.

"Oh that." She waved one hand disinterestedly. "It's all set up for tomorrow morning. They're just finishing the details of it now." She laid her hand on his arm. Titus looked at Missing helplessly.

"That's all right," she said. "I know the way." And with that she marched up the stairs to the upper level. For some reason she didn't find Titus nearly as interesting with a small growth of girl attached to him. Besides, she had other things to worry about just now.

Prudity's fiancée was sitting in the hall outside the door to her bedroom. The door was firmly closed. Wendley had been given a chair and a plate of food. He eyed her incuriously as she approached, then seemed to remember something. He rapped his knuckles on the door.

Prudity Grumm opened the door and looked out. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he said. "You told me to give the signal."

Prudity gave an exasperated sigh. "Only when it's someone important."

"You didn't tell me that."

"Well, I'm telling you now, aren't I?" She slammed the door closed.

Wendley shrugged and went back to his potatoes.

Missing continued on down the hall and knocked on the door she was becoming familiar with. Fitchley answered, and she thought she saw him grin somewhere inside the thatch that grew around his chin.

"Guests!" he sang out in delight, then scurried over to the glass vase and dug out the teeth. He shoved them up into his mistress' mouth and stood back.

Eleganta Sulk opened her eyes and fixed them on Missing. "You," she rasped. "The Gasp girl."

Missing nodded, fighting not to let her lips crawl back up her teeth in disgust. She handed her employer's letter to the woman. Their hands touched briefly in the exchange and Missing shuddered at the sensation of Eleganta's cold, dry fingers.

The woman read the note. "Ten percent deposit," she croaked. "Twelve percent profit." Then she crumpled it up and threw it on the floor.

Missing made to turn, then a thought hit her. "That's a larger deposit and less profit than what you offered last time," she said.

Eleganta Sulk eyed her, as if seeing her for the first time. "Where's Titus?"

"He's downstairs. I came on my own. Why are you offering less than last time?"

"Fitchley. It is speaking to me."

Fitchley twisted his hands nervously, then moved toward Missing, waving them a little as if to brush her off. Missing glared down at him, feeling the unwelcome and surprising heat of anger rising up.

"Why are you doing this? Both your mines are failing. Don't you even care? Even with all this money." She waved her hand around. "You should care about that."

Eleganta blinked. "Money," she said. "Who said anything about money? It's strictly business. That harlot Renna may have cheated me out of my shipping rights, but she won't get that mine without paying through the nose."

Click, Click.

"Renna Gasp? You mean the *original* Sealyham daughter? Your sister? But she–she's been dead for decades!"

Eleganta stared through her, working her lips over her teeth. "Dead? Nonsense. Trying to trick me." She narrowed her eyes. "But I know *her.* She's clever." She chuckled to herself. "Always the clever one in the family."

"You're insane," Missing said, in awe. "You've gone completely off the wharf. You're playing a game you started generations ago, and you don't even realize no one else is playing along."

Eleganta blinked. For one moment, her gaze seemed to clear. Then she closed her eyes. "Tired," she said. "Tired is what I am. Fitchley. Make it go away."

Then she spat her teeth out on the carpet and her head lolled back on the chair. Fitchley stared at them, then stared at Missing, obviously at a loss.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm leaving."

With a sigh of relief he turned his back on her, and attacked the teeth with his small brush.

She wandered back down the hall in a daze and vaguely heard Wendley give the secret signal as she passed. The door was flung open.

"What is it now?"

"The signal," he reminded his betrothed. She glared at him.

"Only when it's important, I said. I've told you that a thousand–wait a minute." She spied Missing. "You. Wait right there."

She dove back into the room. Missing and Wendley shrugged at one another. Prudity reappeared with a handful of pages, which she thrust at Missing.

"Pass these out. It says we're having a walk-out tomorrow morning. Says right here." She pointed to the letters. "W-a-l-k-o-u-t. See? So you can tell people what it says."

Missing stiffened. "I can read, you know. And you should also probably know that it doesn't make people very happy when you paint on their houses and glue things to their doors." She was feeling uncharacteristically hostile just then.

Prudity raised her eyebrow. "It's for their own good. Fight oppression. Rights for women. Anyway, who are you?"

The tenuous thread of patience snapped. "I'm Missing Sealyham," she said, her voice rising. "I've come to your house four times in the last week, and you still can't remember my name? Once you even tried to break me out of prison. Missing Sealyham. I was at the rally. I know you're the Black Lotus."

Prudity shook her head. "I can't place the name. And a lot of girls know I'm the Black Lotus. Anyway, this is for your own good."

"How so?" Missing said. "What *do* I get out of this, Prudity? I could use a new pair of

shoes. Are you going to give me that? How about a nice new dress from the High District? Is your movement going to make them lower their prices and not glare down their noses at me when I go in their shops? What about in the lean times, when there's no extra mending work to be taken in and my aunt and I can't afford a decent cut of beef? Will rallying the city suddenly provide meat for our families? What is it *exactly* that your revolution is going to do for *me?*"

"Beef?" Prudity blinked. "When we run out of beef here, cook always does up a nice pheasant. Why don't you people eat more pheasant?"

It was the "you people" that got to her. "Is everyone in this house completely *deluded?* We *people* can't afford to just substitute pheasant for beef. If you really knew who it was you were stirring up, you'd understand that. But that's sort of the point, isn't it? This movement isn't for *us*, it's for you. I don't think you really care about women being oppressed. I think you just want to make enough noise so that the queen won't force you to marry Wendley. Did you know that?" Missing turned on the young man. "She doesn't want to marry you. Although she'd probably be better off."

Prudity stared at her. Her cheeks flushed red. "How dare you," she said. "How dare you speak to me that way? You're just–why you're only–" a small tear welled up on the cusp of her eyelid. "You're just a *servant*."

Missing felt herself building up steam, and it was as if the ghost of her aunt's sensibility were standing behind her, beating her over the head with the mallet of realization at long last. Without ever quite knowing why, she chose that moment to leap into the life she had always been perfectly happy to regard from a safe distance.

"I thought you were doing all this so I didn't *have* to be a servant," she said. "But it doesn't make any difference. To you I'll *always* be just a servant, and so will all the other people who believe in what you're saying. And now you've set a movement in motion that's actually beginning to *move*. Only you haven't got the faintest idea where it's going. And once it gets there, Prudity, there won't be anyone left to bring you sandwiches or wash your dresses because you will have *liberated* them all."

There was more. Oh, there was so much more to say. About women like her aunt who had never allowed themselves to be oppressed in their lives. About women like Ivy, and Bertie, who owned their own businesses despite the rules that said they couldn't. Women who went *underneath*, like Esmariah, to the dirt and roots of the plant rather than straight at the thorns. Creating change by careful pruning, quietly, and with dignity. Drawing about them the nets of womanly wit and wile not to change things, but simply to carry on.

Prudity's chin quivered. The tears welled up and out. "There's no need to be nasty about it," she said. "I've never been nasty to you, have I? I'm only trying to *he-he-help*." She choked on her sobs.

Missing looked at her. A small worm of pity dug around in the pit of her stomach. "Maybe, somewhere deep inside, that's actually true. Stranger things have happened." She sighed. "I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings."

Prudity merely slammed the door in her face.

There was a long silence.

"She'll come around," Wendley said suddenly. "Mother says she's high-strung."

Missing nodded.

"Anyway, I think she likes me," he said. "Even though she doesn't like to admit it. Mother says she can't help herself. She says I'm a charmer."

Missing handed him the sheaf of flyers. "I don't think I'm going to need these."

Wendley shrugged and went after his roast beef. She wandered back down the stairs.

"Missing." Titus nearly flew to her elbow as she crossed the entry to leave. "Are you going? I've just gotten rid of the limpet. Can't you stay?"

"I have to be somewhere," she said. "I'm sorry."

"I can walk with you." He opened the front door for her and escorted her down the drive. As they passed through the gates he scowled outward.

"I hate this city," he said. Missing turned to him in surprise. "I do. There's never anything to do here. Nothing ever happens. And girls like that, well–" his mouth tugged up briefly. "They're entertaining in their own way, but then they become so upset about it all later on. There's just no one to talk to here."

Missing had not realized he had his hand on her arm until then. "Well," she said. "There's me."

"Yes," he said. "Although we don't get to talk much, do we? I wish you'd tell me more about you."

"There isn't much to tell," she said. "Besides working and my writing–"

"Tell me more about your work," he interrupted. "Didn't you say Esmariah was stripping more gold?"

Missing nodded, disgruntled. That wasn't what she wanted him to ask her about. "Yes. It was delivered to Bray today."

"Do you know what I like?" he asked. "I like gambling. Oh, I know I shouldn't, but that's the only time I feel alive. There's just something about the risk that's–"

"Risky?" she offered. He laughed.

"Yes. I like numbers. Like to calculate the odds. I don't even mind losing. I've lost a lot in my time." He laughed. "That's why they let me come back, because I'm willing to lose so much money. And I *don't* mind. Not really. Makes me feel human. Not just a Sulk."

"Don't you like being a Sulk?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been anything else. Sometimes I wonder what it might be like to be just an ordinary person, like you. It must be nice. Peaceful. That's how I feel when I gamble, and lose. Just like another ordinary person."

Missing shrugged. "It has its moments, I suppose. I used to wonder what it would be like to be someone like you."

"You wouldn't like it. You're much too sensible. Prudity and I, we make good Sulks. It's all we know how to do."

"But have you ever tried anything else?" Missing asked.

"What, like baking?" He laughed. "I don't really see any reason for it. I mean, there are other types of people who are more suited to that sort of thing. I wouldn't be one of them. I didn't even like my lessons until my mother taught me how to use the numbers for gambling. I miss my mother."

"I never knew mine," she said. "Although sometimes I used to pretend she was Nancifela Drunicus, Princess Avenger."

Titus turned to look at her. "I don't really know who that is."

"Oh." Missing blushed and waved her hand. "A character from a book. It isn't important."

By this time they were past the High District and on a small, nearly abandoned street. Titus tugged on her arm and guided her into a shadowy doorway. It wasn't a very large doorway, and they had to stand quite close together. Her heart began to thud heavily.

"You're the only person who understands me, Missing," he said. "Gran doesn't. Gives me that ridiculous pittance of a stipend, as if a hundred Elects a year was enough to live on. Do you

want to know a secret? I'm poor most of the time, although I dress well to hide it. A man has to keep up his image, you know."

Missing remained silent, calculating that it would take her three years in Esmariah's employ to make as much as Titus gambled away in one. But that wasn't important. His breath was brushing against her cheeks. It smelled of heavy spices.

"And Pru, well. We used to be friends. Now there's all this nonsense about women's rights. But you, Missing. You really listen to me. You understand."

"I hardly even know you," she whispered, daring to look into his eyes. They were turned downward. He was slightly shorter than her, so tradition dictated he should have been looking up. One of his fingers began to circumnavigate her elbow.

"Does it really matter?" he said.

There was a kiss coming. She could feel it. All her sinews cried out, knowing, and her chest had begun to rise and fall, rise and fall, in time with his. Still, he did not look up. Well, she thought, there will have to be a meeting of eyes at some point.

"Oh, *Missing*." He sighed, and leaned in.

But his face dove downward instead of up, and she nearly leapt out of her skin as they made contact not with her lips, but with the flesh just above the neck of her shirt, which had been recently modified just for this reason. Yet not precisely for this, she thought. Oh, perhaps to lead to this later, but in her mind she had always imagined a more substantial prologue. Still, she could accept what overtures were offered.

"Titus." She put her hand up to caress his head, to pull it closer, and let her face fall into his hair. Then she breathed in again.

And smelled nothing.

There was no scent on him. There were a thousand smells, but no particular scent she was looking for. He smelled of lunch and its herbs, he smelled of some cologne applied earlier that day, he smelled slightly of sweat and soap.

But he did not smell of old things. He did not smell of deep things.

They have no tie to anything. They just wander, they're always lost, and they know it…they try to steal it away or win it or seduce it because they're empty inside…

And because it was Roger's voice echoing in her head, it was Roger's face that came to her mind.

"Oh, Titus," she murmured, knowing it was all futile. She pushed against his shoulders. But he had the weight of his body behind him, pressing against her. And he was warm and doing something interesting with his tongue, that was undeniable but–he was not looking at her.

"Titus," she said. "Stop."

"No." His voice was muted and insistent. "No, I won't. It gets better, Missing. It gets better if you relax."

Missing leaned her head back against the wall with a sigh. She wasn't afraid. In fact, as he began to burrow, she felt like laughing. Poor, misguided Missing. As if this could have ended any other way, the ghost of sensibility smirked.

"Titus," she said.

He grunted something probably meant to be coercive.

She pushed him away with the full force of her arms, and brought her knee up warningly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I truly am Titus."

He stood back against the opposite wall and smiled.

"Well," he said. "This is new. You know, there are a lot of girls in this city who would give

their teeth to be where you are right now."

"It's not that I'm not one of them," she stammered as he stared at her, his smile tightening. "It's just that this isn't a very good time."

"That's too bad." He shrugged. "Because this is really all the time I've got for you, Missing, and now you've ruined it. Tah."

With that he bolted from the doorway and into the street and was gone in moments. Missing thought she heard him whistling and with all her breath and body wanted to cry out *stay!* But the word wouldn't come to her lips. She made her way home, fighting off tears and the memory of his hands on her and how very warm and expert his lips had been. A space of flesh above her neckline burned with that memory. But–he had not looked at her. He had no ties to the world, and certainly not to her. She cursed herself silently with language her aunt would not have approved of, and crept home.

Her aunt's house was full of people. Croomb and Ivy and Roger were arrayed on the furniture in the sitting room, talking quietly. But Missing's eyes saw only her aunt, and she ran across the room without a thought for dignity. She buried herself in her aunt's shoulder and though taller and larger than the woman felt herself suddenly, comfortingly small.

"What in the *world*," her aunt said.

"Oh, Aunt Orangia, I've had the *worst* day," she sobbed. "And I love you very *much*."

Her aunt's arms went around her slowly, carefully, seeking out new territory with all the care of a ship's captain marking the twain in thick fog.

"Well," Orangia said. "There, there. It's all over now."

Chapter 9

There was an enormous amount of simultaneously welcome and embarrassing comfort then. Ivy came and took one of Missing's hands, patting it warmly. Her aunt made her sit down, then bustled off for some tea. Roger brought her a handkerchief. Inquisitor Croomb asked if anyone had hurt her, and whether or not she wanted him to put them in jail. She thought about it a moment, then shook her head.

"I don't think you can put someone in prison because I've been stupid," she said. "But thank you."

They wanted to know what had happened. Missing told them–about the Sulk house and Prudity Grumm and her audience with Eleganta–everything except the part about Titus. Somehow, she didn't think she would ever tell anyone that.

"Prudity Grumm?" Croomb said. "Seems a bit delicate to be the Black Lotus."

"Good for her," Ivy said, unexpectedly. "It gives her something to do."

"Yes, but she doesn't *care*," Missing said.

"So?" Ivy went back to her seat. "What does she need to care for? She got it started. The people who do care will finish it up."

"Meanwhile, we've got to get down into the mines," Roger said. "This afternoon. Before Bray gets there. Before the tide comes in."

Croomb nodded. "Very well. Against my better judgment, I'll consent to be a part of this." He turned to Missing's aunt. "Those meals you mentioned when I'm thrown in prison. Would they include a nice cod stew?"

"Don't be silly, Morwin," she said. "Everything will work out fine. Besides, we'll all be there together."

"Ur," Roger said. They turned to him. "Would it be possible, that is, would you mind…" He wouldn't look at Orangia. "I've made some arrangements, you see. It's just that my father knows a lot about salt mines, and I've been writing to him for help and asked him to come. He told me he might come today. I didn't know this would be the day we went down into the mines when I sent the letter. And I've given him your address here because, well, it's much nicer than my rooms in the Shunts, honestly. I thought he might turn up before now, but I suppose he's late."

Aunt Orangia pursed her lips. "We could leave a message posted on the door."

Guilty, downcast eyes all around said this would not be acceptable.

"I don't understand," she said. "Have I ever given any of you the impression I have a delicate constitution?"

"Well," Ivy said. "There's your joints in wet weather."

"And your flat feet," Missing added.

"The stomach ailments." Ivy nodded. "Lumbago."

"Your tetchy knee."

"Didn't you have gout last year?"

"And what about the molds and your stuffy head, Aunt Orangia?"

"Very *well*." She cut them off. "I shall stay and wait for Roger's father."

"It's only that we adore you so much, Ora," Ivy said. "And don't want to see you develop some nasty cough down there in the dank."

"Obviously," the woman muttered. "How shall I address this man when I meet him?" She turned to Roger.

"Well," Roger said. "His friends call him Dick."

Aunt Orangia drew herself up. "You can be assured young man, that *I* will *not*. I'm hardly on terms to call the man by his nickname."

"Oh. Richard then. His name's Richard."

Click. Click. Click. Missing's brain was desperately trying to find the appropriate slot into which to feed this sudden, seemingly familiar information. But the brain, perhaps swelled from crying, remained closed.

"Well," Croomb said. "Shall we be off then?"

They left the house in a group and made their way to the Shunts. Croomb and Ivy walked a little ahead of Roger and Missing, without speaking.

"Are you–" Roger said. "Are you feeling better now?"

Missing blushed. "Yes, thanks."

"Would you like to talk about it? Because I'm a very good listener," he said.

"Not really." She sighed. Then a sudden thought hit her. "You know Roger, when I was little I used to imagine my mother was Nancifela Drunicus."

"Brilliant!" Roger grinned. "And I suppose your father was Yoseph the Harderian squire?"

Missing laughed. "Yes, as a matter of fact."

"You could write that, you know. And all the people who still remember, why all the people who read it like we did, would pass it on to their children. 'Children of the Avenger' they'd call it."

"Maybe someday."

"You know," he said, looking carefully at the road ahead. "About your hair."

Missing's hand went to her head, and she was chagrined to find it was leaping out of its braid.

"It's horrible. I know. I just can't ever seem to get it right."

"I like it in a braid," Roger said quickly. "It's just–I sort of liked it the other way too. I thought I might mention it. And your shirt is rather nice. It's very stylish."

"Thank you. And thanks for making up an excuse to keep my aunt home. I'd hate for her to be in any danger."

"Oh, it's not an excuse. My father really *is* coming. I think your aunt will like him. He's a very likable fellow."

* * *

Ivy took them into the Shunts, and then down a side alley. In the daylight, Missing expected to be able to see things more clearly, and she watched her surroundings very intently as they went. But the strange watery effect remained the same–she could clearly see things when she was standing still. Yet when she moved they melted away in a sort of haze that existed right on the cusp of her vision.

"Don't do that, Missing," Ivy said.

"What?"

"Don't try to puzzle it out. It doesn't work that way. There are no laws for these paths. They don't work according to any sensibility."

"Is it some sort of magic?" Croomb asked. He, too, was staring around, squinting with the effort of trying to catch hold of something stable.

Ivy looked at him. "Unimaginative minds might feel the need to call it so. People are always more comfortable when they can label things and put them in the right slots. But no, it isn't magic. It

just is. And I wouldn't go trying to use it to your own advantage, Inquisitor. Very few people can do what we're doing now. Roger and Missing are a little more special than you or I–they can travel here without even trying. Probably because they never considered that they might not be able to. It takes a lot of effort for me, and even more effort to bring you along."

"If I did come here on my own, what would happen?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You would probably just end up on the other end of the alley after a short walk. But it's also very likely we would never see or hear from you again."

"Where would I go?"

"I don't know. I've never been lost here, and never seen anyone again who was."

Eventually they found themselves back on the street outside the Gasp mine. They stood in a little huddled group for a moment, eyeing their destination.

Morgan Ellender was not on guard at the gate that evening. Instead it was occupied by a thick-set, heavily mustached man who didn't look like he was impressed by much, not even the bared rounder portions of any woman's upper torso. Croomb took a moment to size him up. There wasn't much sizing to be done really–he outweighed and out-glared them all.

Inquisitor Croomb readjusted his belt, so as to re-position his girth, then marched straight up to the gates.

"Open in the name of the Queen!"

The man at the gate barely raised an eyebrow. "S' the Gasp mine," he said, as if that solved any issue of authority.

Croomb straightened his shoulders. "I am the queen's official Inquisitor," he said. "And if you don't open up, I shall be forced to write a report on you."

Esmariah's guard smiled, showing a mouth lonely for teeth. That was *all* he did. It was all he had to do.

At that point Ivy stepped forward. "Do you know who this is?" She motioned to Roger, whom she had yanked along with her by the elbow.

The guard looked down. "Some small boy," he said.

"This is the queen's wizard," Ivy told him. "And we are on the queen's errand. And if you do not open that gate, he will make you."

The man looked unimpressed. "He going to write me up, too?"

This time it was Ivy who smiled. "Not quite." She nudged Roger in the ribs.

"I don't know, Ivy. I've never done it to a person before," he whispered.

"I'm not sure that in his case that's an accurate classification," Croomb murmured.

"It will be fine, Roger. Trust me."

Missing saw Roger squint a little at the guard. Then he mouthed a single word.

The guard–showing his consummate professionalism–merely winced as the toes of his boots began to smoke and the leather bubbled. Very carefully, but very quickly, he unlocked the gate and opened it. As he did the fire dissipated with a sullen puff of smoke. Croomb brushed him aside and the others followed. They headed straight for the entrance to the mine. When Missing looked back, she saw the guard had stepped over to a nearby puddle and was cooling his heels in it, still glaring at them with his arms crossed over his chest.

Once into the dark again they paused while Roger lit their lanterns.

"That's a handy trick," Inquisitor Croomb said.

"Yes. I could teach you, if you like. It's very ea–"

"No, you couldn't," Ivy said.

"But you taught me," Roger said.

"Roger, it's easy for you because your mind works a certain way. Men like Croomb, no offense, don't think things the same way you do. Fire works for you because you believe it will. You have the ability to suspend your disbelief, and just *do*. Other people don't have that. They have to bother with why, and how, and who can I use this to hurt. If you really think about it, Roger, you'll see why it's a bad idea."

Roger thought about it a moment. Missing did too. As she did, she realized Ivy was probably right. She didn't believe Croomb would use it to hurt anyone, but in his line of work–where coercion was a necessity–mightn't he one day go too far with it if he had his mind on too many other things at once? Roger's mind, on the other hand, was singularly focused on one thing at one time. He had come to Manking and managed to avoid all the pitfalls of its dubious pleasures simply because he was concerned about the mines. That brought up a question she had not thought to ask herself yet.

"Why are you doing this Roger?"

"Doing what?"

"Why are you working so hard to find out what's going on? You aren't even from Manking."

"I told you. The runes brought me here."

"Yes, but why you? Why here?"

Missing noticed Ivy turn her head slightly, as if to listen. Roger fidgeted with the handle of his lantern for a moment.

"I couldn't really say. That is, I can't really say right now."

"Why not? Is it a secret?"

"Not really. Ur, maybe just a very small secret." He turned to grin at her.

"Will you tell me someday?"

"Of course," he said.

"That's all right then." She smiled back.

It did not take long to get back into the main cavern, and Ivy and Croomb both remarked on its salty splendor. But Roger led them on toward the tunnel with a personal urgency. As they walked, Missing heard him reciting directions under his breath.

When they reached the underground cove, their lanterns lit it up, showing the striated rocks and pond in the middle. Roger walked out to the rock he had wedged in place before. His shoes remained dry.

"Last time we were here, the water covered this rock and that was after the tide had come in," he said. "I'd say we were about an hour from the tide now, wouldn't you?" He turned to Ivy. She nodded. He came out of the pond and took a small sand timer from his pocket. He placed it on a flat rock near the wall, in a small alcove. As he did, the sand began to fall.

"I borrowed this from the bakery. I hope you don't mind."

Ivy shook her head.

"What do we do now?" Croomb asked.

"I think we should have a look around," Missing said, and led them off to the far tunnel. "I think there's another cove beyond this one. I heard it last time we were here."

"Heard it?" Croomb said.

"The water," she told him.

It was actually a much longer journey through the tunnel than she had realized. The water from the neighboring cove echoed through the tunnel as they walked, making it seem that with every turn they took they might stumble upon it. But their lanterns slid along bare, black walls. After some time they finally stumbled into it, finding the drop here much more severe than the cove before it, and no one seemed to have bothered carving any steps.

It was indeed a second cove, but it was as bare and unenlightening as the first. The pond of sea-water in the middle was smaller. Roger counted paces across the cove to the far wall, then called back.

"It's smaller than the first one! But there's another tunnel back here."

The others ran across the floor to see, but Missing paused by the pond of water and stared down. It had to be deep–she couldn't see the bottom. Her lantern lit up just the surface, a pale blue that reminded her of Titus' eyes for a moment. She stared into the underground orb of the sea as the water sloshed up against the toes of her boots. Gently, gently, it lapped and pulled back, lapped and pulled back. She considered wading in, sinking down, being washed out–a small drop in the waves that would plunge and not bob. She was too heavy for bobbing, and too inconsequential to be washed back up on the shore. To be that small seemed incomprehensible–she who had always parted crowds rather than slipped between them, who saw people describing her with their hands outspread, whose waist Titus' hands could not meet around and whose eyes he could not bear to look into. Whose time she had wasted by *thinking* about things too much. "Missing," Ivy said. "You're getting your skirt wet."

Missing looked down to see she had waded into the water up to her knees, and might not have stopped at all. Ivy stood on the shore, her hands folded quietly in front of her.

"I don't care," Missing said.

"I know. I stood on the beach many times when I was your age, and waded in to my knees. A wet skirt never seems very important at the moment. But did you know there are paths in the sea, just like the ones in the Shunts, Missing?"

The baker waded in next to her and took hold of her hand. "They're the old paths. Probably the oldest. Sailors call them riptides. They drag you down, so if you change your mind you can't do anything about it. If you get caught up in them, you can't ever come back. No matter how much you might want to see your Aunt again, or walk down Penham-Wynek again, or write your poetry again. They rip you apart, those tides."

Missing stared down into the lattice of light and dark the reflection of her lantern made.

"Come out of the water, Missing. One stupid decision isn't the end of the world."

"I wish I was more clever about things." Missing turned. "Things like, well, love and such. Because I don't know how it's *done*, Ivy. I don't understand the game, and I don't know the rules."

"No one does, dear. And while it's true that some women have better pieces than you and I do, in the end we often get extra points for having played more honestly. Come along now."

Missing looked at her. The idea of playing fair struck her suddenly. It was what she had been trying to do all along. But no one else seemed to care to. It wasn't fair, and every time she played fair someone else got points for it.

But that wasn't what Ivy had said. She hadn't mentioned playing *fair,* she spoke of playing *honestly.* Was there some place outside of fair that could still be honest? Was that the trick to it all? Cheating on the side of what was right–it was worth thinking over. It appealed to some small, devious part of her that had been hibernating for a while and now raised its head, blinking sleepily. Missing left the water.

"What were you looking for?" Roger asked, joining them. His eyes skimmed the depths, then looked into hers as if whatever she had seen might be momentous and pertinent.

"Riptides," she said.

Roger furrowed his brow. "I don't think you get those down here."

Missing smiled at the water. "You might be surprised how far down riptides go," she said. Ivy squeezed her hand. Roger looked at them both as if puzzling out some foreign language.

Eventually he gave up.

"I'd like to see the cove beyond this one."

"So would I." Mister Croomb joined them. "But it's been quite some time. Shouldn't we go back now and see about the tide?"

They all agreed, casting reluctant glances at the far wall. Then they began to make their way back to the first cove in silence. Roger walked next to her, behind the two adults. In the shadow, where the light of their lanterns did not quite meet, she felt his arm brush against hers with the slightest intimate whisper of cloth.

Back in the original cove they saw Roger's timer had nearly run out of sand.

"The tide's already coming in outside." Roger pursed his lips thoughtfully. "But the rock's only half covered. The tremors usually happen about an hour or so after the tide comes in."

"So they don't have anything to do with the tide," Croomb said.

"Not necessarily," Ivy replied. "There *is* more water in here now than there was an hour ago."

"Maybe it just comes in slower here," Missing said. "Because wherever this water comes in, it's just a smaller opening under the rocks." She pointed to the pool. "You see? It has to come *in* from out there. And it can't come in as quickly."

"So what do we do now?" Croomb sighed.

"I think we'll just have to wait." Ivy settled herself down on the ground. "Why don't you sit here, Inquisitor? I think it's time you and I had a talk about your love life."

Croomb looked startled. "I hardly think that's something–I mean, we hardly know one another–"

"You might be surprised at what I know about you, Croomb." Ivy smiled at him. "And though you may think there isn't much to talk about, certain opportunities are about to present themselves to you that I think you should be prepared for." She patted the ground next to her firmly.

The Inquisitor sighed, and sat.

Missing and Roger moved around to the opposite side of the pond to give them some privacy, holding back their giggles until they were well out of range. They found a nice sandy patch, and Roger turned the tiny hourglass over again, then drew out his pouch of runes. He dumped them on the ground between them.

"What do you see?" Missing eyed the buttons.

"Ah." He pushed his hair back out of his eyes. "Do you see that little red button? That came off of one of my mother's favorite shirts after she wore it out. And this black one here?" He pointed to a large onyx piece with two holes in it. "That's from my father's old cloak. They always land together."

"Are your parents in love, Roger, do you think?"

"Oh yes. Madly." He rolled his eyes. "You would think after so many years they would sort of, I don't know, cool off. But for as long as I've known them they can't really stand to be apart. I suppose it's because they like one another a lot. Plus, Dad brings her lots of flowers and things."

"Do you get along with your parents well?"

"Mostly." He shrugged. "We argue from time to time, of course. But in the grander scheme of parenthood I think I got very lucky. I mean, a lot of kids' parents do horrible things to them, you know."

Missing nodded. "I think I got lucky too. My aunt has always been very stern–she doesn't have much sense of humor–but she's always given me everything I needed, even if I didn't always get what I *wanted*. I think she probably made the right decision about that pony I wanted when I was eleven. I mean really, where would I keep a pony in the city?"

Roger laughed. "Do you see this button?" He pointed to a large square piece of polished wood. "That one's mine. I don't know where it came from, but it was the first one my mother ever gave me. Too big to swallow, you see. I used to carry it around the way some children carry blankets."

"What about this one?" Missing pointed to a lovely little piece of ivory carved into the shape of a bird.

Roger didn't answer right away. "You can have that one, if you like," he said. "I mean, I can't actually give it to you. But it can be yours, if you want."

Missing picked it up and rubbed it with her thumb, swallowing it up in the palm of her hand.

"Thank you Roger," she said. "It's very nice."

"Well." He shrugged. There was a moment of awkward and meaningless silence. "Do you want to play chess?" He asked at last. "I've got enough buttons for the larger pieces, only we'll have to use rocks for the pawns."

By the time the sand in his timer had run out again they were well into a heated argument.

"No, you haven't got check," Roger told her again. "That's just your pawn, and it can't make the jump."

"No." Missing shook her head. "That's my castle."

"That," Roger said, "is a rock. All the rocks are pawns, remember?"

"I changed my mind," Missing said.

"What do you mean you changed your mind?"

"I mean, I changed my mind and now I'm using my rock as my castle."

"I *captured* both your castles."

"Yes, I know. That's why I'm using my rock. And all those other rocks are knights and bishops too, so you may as well give up."

Roger looked up at her. Missing grinned. He laughed.

"Fine. Checkmate then. But you're a horrible cheater."

"I won, didn't I? Sometimes you just have to cheat. It's been an hour." She pointed to the timer.

They rose and met Ivy and Croomb near the edge of the water where the rock was submerged. Croomb had an expression on his face that seemed simultaneously amazed and deeply concerned. Yet the small curl of a dazed smile indicated the concern was taking back seat to the amazement.

They looked down at Roger's submerged rock. It was nearly covered by water now. Then they looked at one another, sat down, and waited.

And waited. And waited.

"I don't think–" said Croomb.

The roar hit them just seconds before the tremor did. Missing and the others were flung aside and all around like straw dolls, even though they had been sitting. The tremor in the ground lifted them up and shoved them aside. They picked themselves up out of the water and mud and looked around, wide-eyed. Shaken not so much by the tremor but by the sound that had preceded it.

It was a sound that swept through the tunnels and erupted on their ears like the drum of sudden rain and too-close-for-comfort lightning. It shattered their nerves. It was not the groan of rock or water, not any noise made by settling sediments or fault lines. It was a noise that came from a throat, though any throat that uttered that sound had to have vocal chords the size of small hills. Though it did not speak, it shrieked out in some monosyllabic language a sound that thrummed the sinews in each of their primal memories–*despair, and rage, and despair!*

"My God," Croomb muttered.

"Oh? Have you only got one to pray to? That seems a little pessimistic," Ivy said.

"What is it?" Croomb put his hand on his sword.

"I don't know." Roger reached out to steady Missing by the elbow. "But you don't hear *that* above ground. And it's somewhere in here."

"It came from that direction." Missing pointed to the far wall and the tunnel leading to the adjoining cavern.

"How do you know?" Croomb asked.

She didn't. She didn't know anything for certain. But the cry had touched on something deeper than even her primal memory. It had touched on the far reaches of her heart where the urge to drown herself was still present, but resting dormant because Ivy had reminded her there was something to live for.

She looked at Roger. "I just know," she said.

"Let's go then." He took up his lantern and led the way toward the tunnel.

It was hard going. For every ten steps they took they were hindered by the slow but persistent shrieks that shook the caverns and brought down worrying amounts of silt from the roof. Once into the second cove they had to pause and wait. The bellow came again, knocking them to their knees. Missing struggled up, driven onward by something in the sound that she knew only she could hear. A certain finality lay buried within it. A certain sense of countless efforts unrewarded and the knowledge that nothing further could be done. That for all the fight, the end was imminent. The wailing was as much a declaration of what had passed before, as it was a keening for what was to come.

They passed through the second cove and into the tunnel they had not yet explored. This one was similarly dark and winding. Again and again they were thrown to their knees and staggered along drunkenly without speaking, without even helping one another now, driven by the imperative of finding the source of those cries. It seemed a longer trek between coves, but may have been shorter. There was no sense of time, really. Only the urge of immediacy.

They stumbled into another cavern, falling on top of one another like sticks of wood. Then they got up, Roger re-lit their lanterns, and they had to close their eyes at the blinding flash that occurred when he did.

Missing felt her jaw fall slowly, driven downward by the gravitational forces of disbelief. It was another cove. A very small one, but also with a pool of water in the middle. Everything else was gold. And much of it was now underwater.

It was piled up to a man's height against the walls and littered the sandy little beach of the pool of water. This was the junkyard of some small Midas, the place where the gold came to die, the cast-off jewelry box of the gods. It was everywhere, and it was everything. Tables, chairs, statues of half-clad children waving bows and arrows. There were enormous disks of it lining the walls, great golden shields and rather tacky golden wall hangings of the sort people who have a lot of useless money lying around buy because they are amused by them. There were gold plates, and what looked like half a suit of gold armor. Golden boxes of golden bullion, golden swords, picture-frames, knick-knacks, a chess board, a small wooden box full of golden dice. The thing about gold, Missing thought, is that it isn't really a very useful metal. She picked up a golden cup. About all you can make out of it are silly, luxury items to show off to the neighbors. And this was the yard sale to end all.

"Look," Roger pointed. "Some of it's getting washed out."

He was right. Some of the gold trinkets nearer the water had been submerged in the rising of the tide and bobbed along for a moment before sinking downward to the dark depths in a flurry of

bubbles until they winked out of sight.

"Now what do you suppose this is for?" Croomb picked up what looked like a pair of jeweled manacles with some sort of chain attached to a small spring.

"There's another tunnel back here," Ivy said from the opposite side of the cavern. She looked at Croomb. "You ought to keep that. It might come in handy when those opportunities I told you about present themselves."

Croomb dropped the item and nudged it away into the pile with his toes, blushing furiously.

Another roar rocked the mines, throwing them down amongst the gold that rattled and clanked and shivered and fell over. Missing fell half-in and half-out of the water, then raised her head and found herself face to face with the oddest object of them all. It was a large golden sphere, at least as big as an armful of laundry. It was nestled in a thick bed of gold shavings of various things that looked like they had been inexpertly shredded by something very sharp. The round object quivered a little with the lingering tremor. She noticed that it did not seem to be the same type of gold as everything else.

Its surface was smooth and leathery. Not gold at all. Only gold-*colored,* and because of that, well camouflaged by all the other gold around it. The rising water was lapping at its bottom, seeping among the shavings of the odd bed it rested in.

"I found something," she said, so quietly she barely heard herself.

"What is *that*?" Croomb breathed. They all gathered around to stare at it.

Missing looked up into their faces. "Don't you see? It's an egg."

Then, in the astonished silence, something breathed.

* * *

Orangia hurried from the kitchen to answer the door. Rather than the traditional method of knocking, someone had chosen to drum at the wood with a volley of thunderous blows. She pursed her lips in irritation and took hold of the knob.

"Now really–" she began.

"WHAT HO GOOD WOMAN!" the knocker bellowed.

Orangia got a vague glance of something she considered to be a maniacal grin. But as it was somewhere above her head and preceded by the massive front of a gale-force voice, she could not quite take it all in at once. A large, fleshy platter was thrust at her. It was a hand.

"RICHARD SEALYHAM HERE. BLESSINGS ON YOU AND YOUR HOUSE," he threatened.

He stepped up, wedging himself into the doorway, then pushed through. His face was mostly covered with hair and beard, but from amidst the facial foliage a nose dove out like a shelf between two glittering eyes. Orangia stepped back, her heart pattering nervously somewhere near her throat. One of the cats took one look at the man, hissed, then decided not to waste time on idle threats and fled the room.

"WE'VE COME TO–"

From behind him a smaller voice spoke up. "Richard, dear, what have I told you about using your indoor voice?"

Richard blinked. "–come to see the boy."

A tiny figure emerged from his shadow. Orangia looked down at what she at first thought was some small circus performer. In actuality, it was a perfectly proportioned woman, though her proportions seemed more suited to doll houses. She was patting her dark hair back into place with delicate little fingers that moved deftly, rearranging pins and combs like a small bird tidies its nest.

She had a pleasant, narrow face and enormous green eyes. She and her husband were both dressed in what appeared to be very fine clothes picked out by a blind man–color and patterns zigged across their bodies, blooming with an apparent joy for discord.

She gave a small, neat curtsy, and Orangia felt the slow flush of flattery rise up her cheeks.

"How do you do. Lenore Sealyham. My husband Richard. Our Roger sent us to you," she said.

"MY FRIENDS CALL ME DICK!"

"Indoor voices, Richard. Indoor voices," his wife said.

"Dammit," he replied. "'S hard to remember."

"Yes, but you're making a wonderful effort." Lenore patted his arm. She had to reach up to do so.

Orangia stared. The two parents stared back, both smiling expectantly.

"Orangia Task," she managed at last. "Won't you come in?" She motioned to the chairs in the sitting room, then stopped in mid-gesture. "Oh my." She blinked. "Did you say *Sealyham*?"

Chapter 10

There are sounds that worry the nerves. There are mysterious things that go bump in the night, and make the heart pit-pat until a glass of water and much inner dialogue can convince one it was just a loose shingle or the slow settling of foundation. There are the wails of amorous cats in alleys that elicit a slight chill, the roll of incoming thunder that makes huddling under a blanket a warm and comforting place to be.

This was not one of those sounds.

This sound was the slow sibilant breath of something deeper and darker and much more frightening because it was not a loose shingle, nor a cat. It was a ponderous breath, in the interim of which it seemed wholly possible tides broke and saplings turned to trees and spores became mold. There was a heaviness of age and weight and the enormous patience of stone and weather. I have breathed, it said. I shall breathe again.

Whatever it was, it was also awake, and hidden somewhere beyond the last tunnel on the opposite side of the cavern. They all got the very strong feeling that not only was it waiting, it was also *smelling* them.

"I really wish I had more than one god right now," Croomb whispered.

"You'd better just hope yours isn't busy," Ivy replied.

It didn't seem to Missing that any of them were really breathing. Whatever was in the last tunnel could do enough breathing for all of them, for the next hundred years.

"What is it?" Croomb turned to the others. "What's in there?"

"A dragon," Roger said. He turned to Ivy. "That's what they call it, isn't it? And this is its *nest*." He gestured around.

"Then why isn't it here?" Croomb asked.

"Let's go find out," Missing said, and headed off.

"You know, I find youngsters today to be unwholesomely assertive," Croomb muttered.

The final tunnel was short, and its cavern did not have a pond. It did, however, have a pillar of salt. It was massive and thick and looked to be holding up the entire cavern, if not indeed the roof of the world. But it was nearly buried under the thick collar of a chain whose links were probably at least as thick as Missing's thighs. The chain had been wrapped around and around the pillar until only the faint glint of salt crystals could be seen here and there in the few places where the links did not overlap. The remaining length of the chain led off into a long, wide crevice even the lantern light could not illuminate, ending in darkness.

From the dark of that chasm came the slow, deep rumblings of the beginning of the horrible wail. Some of the darkness began to lift, yawning upward like a small continent–like some entire moon–and the pale fire of their lanterns was reflected off the oceanic yolk of an eye.

The creature erupted from the crevice. There was only time to get the vaguest sense of enormity–and teeth. By the time Missing realized she should be running, she should have already been running. She was yanked at from behind and whirled to stumble back into the tunnel after the others.

"Down!" Roger shoved her to the floor and layered himself on top of her.

The creature ran straight toward the tunnel. As she did, she bellowed. The chain rattled, dragged along in her wake, until it was brought up short. The creature was yanked back like a small

mongrel on a length of string. Her mouth opened and shut, not with a snap or a bite, but with an enormous *harunk* that stank of old fish, and the sea, and salt.

In the wake of flinging herself against her restraint, the beast shook the cavern literally at its very foundation–the pillar in the center to which she was fettered. She bellowed with a rage that made Missing's heart stop a moment. Roger sat up carefully, and they found themselves only inches from two nostrils like tunnels that snuffled and spewed them with mucus. But it could not come any further inward.

The creature strained against her collar again, a piece of iron like to gird a small house, spotty with rust. Some of the links near her face were deeply scored so the newer metal underneath shone up through the rust–she had obviously been gnawing on them in desperation. She picked herself up, paced once around the pillar–shortening her chain still further–and whined. A small wind picked up when she did. Finally she lay down and put her head on her front feet, which might have been called paws had they not had sharp enough talons to embarrass an armory.

Only then did they find themselves able to breathe again, and with the luxury to gaze at the creature without the annoying necessity for flight. She eyed them through an astonishingly familiar, almost human eyeball, white on the edges and black in the middle. However, it was the size of a wagon, and much older than most of the eyeballs they knew.

She stretched from one end of the cavern to the other and also rose *up.* It was as if, and Missing thought this highly probable, there was just a little too much of her to recline comfortably. Her hide was smooth but thick, rippled into folds that threatened to spill over in a tsunami of skin. It was an old hide, cratered with punctures and tears that had healed over into pale and pulpy hieroglyphics; she wore her story on her, in the incomprehensible language of the deep. A blunted nose overlay a mouth like a field furrow, parted and panting, revealing teeth–and more teeth. Despite the breadth of flesh, most of her seemed preoccupied with sharp parts specifically designed to *harunk* and tear.

"Those fools." Ivy wiped sputum from her face. "Idiots. How could they chain her up? What in the world was Esmariah thinking?"

"Esmariah didn't do it," Missing said, standing on shaky legs. "Don't you see? If they had done it, Bray wouldn't have been in here that night looking for it." She turned to Roger. "*That's* what he was calling for."

"So they do know it's here. That's why they bring the gold," he said. "But it doesn't make sense. If they've chained her up, she can't get to the gold, or to her egg. Who would be that stupid?"

"And where's the gold going, if not into the nest?" Missing said. Her mind was annoying her with a mad whirring, little pieces of information flying here and there to similarly shaped slots. *Click, click*, thing's got an egg. *Click, click,* hides it in with the gold. *Click, click*–

"Fifty years," she said. "What sort of animals live underground like this?"

"Lots of animals live underground," Croomb said.

"Yes, but." *Click, click, fifty years and one egg and one year of inactivity.*

"What animals only go underground at certain times of the year?"

"Bears," Roger said.

"Anything that hibernates," Ivy said.

"And they dig, don't they?" Missing looked up. "They…burrow. And everything they burrow out has to go somewhere, doesn't it? So if this thing burrows in salt mines then–"

"That's where Esmariah gets her salt," Croomb said. "Cheap labor."

"Only this thing lays an egg, too," Missing said. "One egg for fifty years of burrowing. That's a lot of work." She frowned. "Now the egg is in danger. And she *knows* it. If the egg doesn't hatch

before the water rises again, it might drown."

"I think I understand now. That letter you got from the Gasp house explained everything, only I didn't know how to see it." Roger swiped his hair from his eyes. "This thing, or maybe her grandmother and great-grandmother, have been hibernating in these coves for centuries. Once every fifty years they lay an egg. When the egg hatches, which according to our time-line should be right about now, they take it back to the sea. But I wonder how it is they don't starve to death in here?"

"Bears don't eat all winter while they hibernate," Ivy said. "They store up their food. Something that big could store up a lot of food."

"This is all worthy speculation." The Inquisitor drew himself up. "But what can we do about it? That collar's a foot thick. Can Roger set fire to it and set the, ur, thing free?"

Roger shook his head. "Not without hurting her, I expect."

"Bring the egg to her," Ivy said.

"No!" Missing stepped forward. "She *knew* we were in the nest. She could smell us. I don't think we should touch it. Sometimes…sometimes cats will eat their own young if they smell people on them. The wilder ones, that is."

"Which brings up an interesting question." Croomb glanced at the dragon, who exhaled at him. "Is it our intention to *save* these things?"

"Yes," said Missing and Roger together, without thinking.

Croomb sighed. "I thought you might say that. The misguided empathy of the young, I suppose. You both do know that a nice chicken dinner at some point came from some perfectly innocent chickens, don't you? Animals die, eventually. Even dragons."

"Of course," Ivy replied. "But this is different."

"How so?"

No one replied. Instead they looked at the creature. She sighed and settled on one side.

"It just is," Missing said. "It's different because it didn't ask us to be here, and no one told it to move. No one warned it we'd be stealing its gold, or using it to mine salt, or chaining it up so it couldn't get to its egg."

And? Her mind said. *And what else?*

But she knew. It was because the creature was like her. It had slept here for hundreds of years, safe in its caves and its tunnels and with the sea to retreat to. In all those hundreds of years, it had not had to change. Gold was brought to it. It laid its egg. It settled in and settled down and never had to worry about what was going on above–in the world outside.

Her aunt used to have a saying. It was, "wouldn't you like to go outside and play with people your own age?" Missing would look up from her writing, leaving her hero suspended in time, and say "what for?" That was the question. What for? Why bother, when she was so involved in the great romance of the things she wrote, the small worlds she imagined and colored out in words? They were always dependable, her heroes and villains–she could push them off cliffs and run them through the gauntlet of pains and pleasures and throw them massive parties when they returned alive. They always came back alive. And they were always witty, and always knew what to say.

They never bothered that she was a large, lonely orphaned girl with no immediate prospects who could only come up with the right response hours after a conversation–to them she was a god. She always had the right words. She always wore the prettiest dress. Set on the high mountain of her solitude, in the attic room with the door closed, she was everything she ever wanted to be without the embarrassment of body odor or clothes that didn't fit quite right. Things only changed when she decreed it. The changes were always safe, and slow, and nothing more than she could handle.

If the dragon had been left alone, the tide would not have bothered it at all. But people had a

way of worming themselves in and chaining others to pillars of salt that held up the world.

"It's our fault this is happening," she said. "*It* hasn't changed in hundreds of years, but we're trying to *force* it to. And that's wrong."

"Not my fault," Croomb said. "The forest has to make way for the road. Sheep meadows make way for cities. The fallen make way for the mighty."

"It isn't our fault," Roger said. Missing looked at him, surprisingly hurt. She had thought he would conspire on this with her.

"It isn't *our* fault," he said again. "But maybe we can find out whose fault it is. That's something at least, isn't it?"

He looked at her. "The last time we were here it was just about this time. And you said Bray's bringing another load of gold down. I don't think that gold is being put in the nest, because the dragon's chained up. So–"

"Whoever's taking the gold might have chained her up," Missing muttered. Again, without waiting, she turned and made her way back.

"Missing!" Croomb cried out behind her. "I promised your aunt–oh, damn the young."

"Might as well damn yourself," Ivy said. "You did a few foolish things when you were young too. The name Lacinda Daily comes to mind."

"I was *enchanted*." His voice echoed forward on the cusp of Missing's consciousness. "There were *elves* involved."

"There's no such thing as elves," Ivy said. "Just drunken boys who–"

"Yes, I've heard. Singing Wee Willy Winkle. I know all about it."

"I think it's lovely that you and Orangia have shared these things, Croomb."

His reply would not have pleased her aunt at all.

They made their way back to the main cavern, unhampered by any more outbursts from the dragon. For the time being it seemed worn out, or perhaps just waiting. When they returned they agreed on a hidden position behind boulders on the far side of the pond and settled down to wait.

Roger took out his runes and spilled them across the pebbles behind their vantage point. Missing watched him settle down and stare heavily.

"What do you see?"

"Can't quite make it out," he said. He pushed his hair out of his face. "Something about a change."

Missing sighed. "That can't be good."

"Well, it doesn't seem to be bad."

Missing pointed to her own button, half-buried in the middle of all the others that appeared to have ganged up on it.

"What does that mean?"

"It looks–it looks like you're going to be in a crowd," he said. He pointed to his button, set apart from the others. "And I'm going to be somewhere else. I don't know. This is very confusing. None of the ards seem in agreement to the pells. And the nyaks have gone positively insane. I've never seen it before."

"Maybe it's the weather," Ivy said.

"Does it do that?" Croomb asked. "The weather I mean. Does it change things in the runes?"

Ivy smiled at him patiently. "No Croomb. I was making a joke. The runes don't change for weather, unless the weather is important. I don't think we have to worry about that down here."

She drew a small loaf of bread out of a deep pocket in her skirt, tore off chunks and passed them around, then drew a flask from another pocket.

"Water," she said. "Eat."

They did, passing the flask. Meanwhile Ivy took the remainder of the bread, tore it into small pieces, and cast them among Roger's buttons. Strangely enough, many of the crumbs landed near or on top of Roger's buttons.

"Yes." Ivy studied them. "Some change coming. And Missing's right in the midst of it." She looked up at the girl. "The center of attention, one might say."

Missing didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Put them away," she said. "Please."

"But they may be trying to tell us something," Roger replied.

"They're just bread and buttons, Roger. All they're telling us is that the heavier ones land on top."

He looked at her, showing the first sign of annoyance she had ever seen in him. "They aren't just buttons," he said. "I'm about sick and tired of people saying, 'oh yes, runes, but my, don't they look just like buttons?' You know, I could really make a go of this wizard thing. I mean, I *can* make fire, you know."

"Yes." Missing's ire rose to meet her fatigue. "You light lanterns and set shoes on fire. Very clever. And useful. I imagine Ivy can get her ovens started easily on wet mornings now that you're around."

"That's true," Ivy murmured.

Roger began gathering his runes and stuffing them into his bag. "Yes, I'm a baker. So what? I suppose you'd prefer it if I were some blue-eyed fop dressed in silks. That'd be more to your taste, would it? As long as I cast a glance at you, never mind actually *caring*–"

"Now, now," Croomb said, with the embarrassed flush of a man who doesn't deal well with conflict. They both ignored him.

"You shut up, Roger," Missing warned. "Just shut up. You don't know anything about what I think."

"How do you know?" He fumed, and his eyebrows drew together. "I'm a wizard. I just *might* be able to read your mind, you know."

"Oh? Then read this." She shot him a scathing look and added several unflattering adjectives in her head just in case he was right. Some of them had to do with goats.

"Oh, Missing, *really*," Ivy said reproachfully.

Roger stared at her a moment. "Never mind," he said, turning away. He threw himself back against the boulder with a sniff.

"Blue-eyed fop," she said. "I suppose you mean Titus. I suppose you think you know something about it. But it's deeper than that, Roger."

Ivy and Croomb watched, spectators at an event of enormous adolescent portent.

"There was a real bond between us that you don't know about," Missing went on. "Titus and I have something in common, you know. He may dress well, but as a matter of fact, Mister Wizard, he doesn't have any–"

She stopped. It seemed an appropriate place, since something went *click*.

"What?" Roger sneered. "Charm?"

"No." She barely heard herself whisper. "No. It's something else he doesn't have."

"Wit?" Roger went on relentlessly. Missing waved her hand.

"No. Just shut up a minute. I'm trying to think."

Titus had never once asked her about her writing. But he had asked her a lot about her job.

It came to her. Knowledge filed into slots over-flowing with things she should have noticed a

long time ago.

"But he's very kind," she said, on the verge of angry tears. "He walks me home from work some days. Well, nearly home. Until the alleys in the Shunts anyway, where the gaming houses are."

"He's an idiot," Roger said. He folded his arms over his chest and glared at the striations on the cavern wall as if they had called him names.

"I don't think so. I think I've been the idiot. Really this time. Really, really a stupid idiot."

She felt the tears welling up but was spared the embarrassment of crying when Roger put out the lanterns suddenly.

"I heard someone in the tunnel," he said.

Together, in the dark, they peered up over the boulders of their hiding place. All arguments were forgotten.

"One moment of stupidity isn't the end of the world," Ivy breathed into her ear. "You get more chances, you know."

Missing didn't reply, but somehow it didn't make her feel any better.

A lantern lit the tunnel opening and spread a wash of gold into the cove. Cadaberous Bray, his great-coat lying tattered around him, carefully maneuvered a small barrow down the stone steps and into the cavern. When he reached the edge of the water he stopped. By the light of his lantern, suspended from a pole on the barrow, they could just make out the dark candescence of gold. He removed the lantern and carefully set it on a nearby rock. Then, with a twitch of his misshapen shoulders and a grunt, he upturned the cart so that all the gold spilled out. There were a few moments while he retrieved several items from the water. Then he began to arrange them.

Stooping and rising like a buttermilk churn he tidied up all the pieces of gold into a large pile. There didn't seem to be much, and he stood back to eye his tribute with pursed lips. Then, whistling tunelessly between his pale and fish-colored lips, he began to work.

For the better part of an hour they watched him. His hands, with joints like knots, darted here and there amongst the priceless refuse. The golden shavings from someone's portrait became a small trail leading from the water's edge and widened to frame the art of his creation. Several small necklaces were arrayed masterfully around a few knick-knacks shoved down securely into the sand–a squat candle holder, a small boy embracing a duck, an old hourglass frame with no glass or sand in it. Some gold coins were piled up coquettishly near the front. Finally, eyeing his creation critically, Bray sighed and drew something from the pocket of his coat.

"I had hoped to save you for her," he said to the object imprisoned and anonymous in his hands. "She did so like you. But she will like you better if you bring more salt."

So saying he set a golden dog figurine with jeweled paws down in the middle as the centerpiece. Then he waded into the water and sank down until his eyes were just level with the shore. Slowly, with great and ponderous care, he swiveled his head from side to side, eying the gold as if he were some creature newly emerged from the sea. He crept up onto the shore, his arms become heavy limbs that pulled his body from the water. He eyed the golden shavings with interest. His gaze was caught by the golden coins, and he snuffled at them curiously. Then he went on to examine the statuettes and golden necklaces, the timeless time-piece.

Missing felt her skin crawl as she watched the misshapen man mimic the form of the thing in the cavern two tunnels away. Though he was skeletal, and smaller, she saw that he had lost himself in the charade. So thoroughly in fact that a thread of saliva dripped from his lips, and mucus glistened under his nose.

"Can't think how I missed it," Ivy whispered in her ear. "The old shaman of the shores, the Gasp family mines dating back to who knows when–whenever they bought them from the herding

tribes, I suppose. They became the Gasp's priests–going about the secret rituals and passing them on only to their own. I wonder which one sold out the tribes? Poor old sot. All this time, his only job to make sure the dragon was happy."

He played out his part, slow and old and water-born, dragging his long legs behind him so that they made tracks in the sand that were quickly erased by water. The tracks of something longer and wider than him, something more substantial than he had ever been. Something more meaningful and aged, something that his ancestors had known of. Something his father and his father's father had watched crawl out of the murk.

Something in his urgency brought the sting of a waiting tear to Missing's eye. This sickly pantomime, this humbling of the self that was never intended to be witnessed by anyone outside the Order of Bray, was the earnest work of a man who had been caught up in the rituals of time and never once considered looking past the tunnel beyond–why bother, when for hundreds of years, nothing had ever *changed*?

Bray stood, dripping. He bent to let one long twig of a finger stray across the dog's head.

"Please come back," he said.

"She can't." Missing heard the words before she felt them on her lips.

Bray darted up to his full height, then glared around at the dark corners of the cavern.

"Esmariah," he breathed, with a note of certainty and awe.

"No." Missing stood up. "It's me. Missing Sealyham."

Bray's eyes narrowed as he caught sight of her, rising up from behind a boulder. "What are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are," she said. "Looking out for our employer's interests, like you said. Only we've really looked, Mister Bray. And we've found what you couldn't."

"It will come for the gold." He blinked. "It always comes for the gold."

"She can't. She hasn't come for that gold for a very long time."

Bray laughed, and swept his sleeve across his mouth and nose to clear away the phlegm. "You know nothing about this, my dear. How could you possibly know anything?"

"I know…" Missing swallowed. "I know about the deep things. I know about the smell. I know you've been doing this for a long time. That your kind did it from the very beginning, and went on doing it after the Gasps bought the mine."

Bray blinked, then let his shoulders sag. Yet his eyes gleamed when he looked at her, and there was a bitter twist to his lips. "I've been at this all my life, and my father and grandfather before me. *We* are the ones who call the dragons. Our kind has been here since the beginning–since the sheep ran over these hills. *We* saw how they loved the gold and shiny things, and would leave us alone if we left offerings for them. *We* were the ones that went to the Gasps and told them how to use the creatures that lived in their mines, how to placate them, how to provide for them."

He stretched out his arms, and spittle flew from his lips in agitation. "In the eternal service of our Gasp masters we made the study of the salt-diggers our science. Did I run the streets and play as a lad? No! Did I go to schools with books and other boys? No. This was my school, these caves my playground. My father brought me here nearly every day, and we would follow it through the caverns, watching how they moved. He used to say to me '*See how they eye the gold, Cadaberous. See how it pleases them both to have it artfully arranged. See how you must lay it down carefully, and eye it just so, as if you were one with the creatures.'* And I did, and I learned, and now you think you're going to tell me *anything* about the thing that sleeps in these caves? After I and my own have been bringing the dragons back for generations?"

Missing stared at him. The others were still huddled down behind the boulder, listening

quietly.

"All I know," she said, "is that sometimes things change."

Cadaberous Bray stared at her, and his left cheek twitched a little. Missing shrugged.

"Utter Riley thinks you're stealing the gold, you know," she said.

The man's face contorted into an ugly sneer. "*Utter*."

"But I don't think it's you. I think it's someone else. I think stealing from Esmariah has become a family business, only someone else's family is benefiting. The thing you're looking for? It's chained up in a cavern back there." She motioned with her hand. "It's a very long chain, Mister Bray. Long enough that for a while it could still move around. But it got itself tangled up, and it couldn't get to the gold anymore. Now it can't get to the one thing in the world that it really wants. And it's going to tear this mine down or die trying."

"Chained up," he repeated, and looked away.

"And it's got an egg, but the tide's going to drown it."

"The egg." His voice was becoming smaller and smaller. Missing waited as a flurry of emotions passed over his face like ripples in buttermilk.

Finally his shoulders dropped, and his hands fell helplessly to his side. "What can we do?"

"Come and sit down, Cadaberous," Ivy said, rising. "Have some bread. That's a good enough place to start."

The tall man crept to her as obediently as a scolded pet, and folded himself up behind the boulders of their hiding place. He glanced at the rest of the assembled company.

"All of you here? Why?"

"Same reason as you." Inquisitor Croomb patted him gruffly on the shoulder. "We're just doing what we think we ought to do."

* * *

Orangia and Lenore smiled pleasantly at one another across the small sitting room. Neither smile showed the least bit of strain. When one or the other needed to rest, they simply raised their mug of tea and drank. Orangia had begun needing a trip to the privy an hour ago.

Richard was rolling a shiny gold Elect on the floor for one of the cats to chase. He seemed to understand he had no real place in the conversation at hand.

"Roger seems like a very bright young man," Orangia said. "He's taken a job at the bakery of a friend of mine. I've been feeding him his meals."

"Yes, he wrote us." Lenore nodded. "I can't thank you enough. I did so worry about his nutrition here."

Smile, nod. Smile, nod.

"THAT'S A CLEVER PUSS!" Richard declared. The cat leapt up about two feet, then turned to eye him warily. Another mange-riddled beast was purring away in his lap, submitting itself to an affectionate mauling around the ears.

"I feel I must inform you I retrieved him from jail," Orangia said.

"The fight, yes," Lenore replied. She appeared to wink slightly. "Ah, the erascitude of the young."

"Mmm," said Orangia. She did not know what erascitude was, and did not like it. She prided herself on her own grasp of vocabulary, and among the working-class was considered something of an expert.

"Your Missing, I've heard, was quite instrumental in that," Lenore said. She was still smiling.

"She defended herself." Orangia straightened up. "I've always taught her to defend herself."

"Roger wrote that she fought like a gladiator." Lenore laughed a little. "He was quite impressed. I believe in young women defending themselves these days. I think it's nonsense to believe all those old romances where women fell over at the first sight of a man and let him have his way with them. *I* never did that, and I married perfectly well."

Orangia eyed her carefully.

"She isn't a shrinking flower, my Missing," she said. "I find her to be a very clever girl, if somewhat rash."

"Oh well." Lenore shrugged. "Rashes may be cured by the liniment of time, don't you think? Besides, there is no knowledge so valuable as that of Noses, Knees, and Nethers, in my opinion. I'm quite eager to meet your Missing. Roger goes on and on about her in his letters. I'm afraid he's quite taken with her."

"Yes," Orangia said. "I suspected that myself. Unfortunately, my Missing has no title to speak of. Her parents were poor tinkers. But she herself has excelled. She's a writer, you know."

"Oh, titles." Lenore waved her hand dismissively. "I never had one. Richard had the title. A writer, you say?"

"She's very clever with words."

"Now *that's* an admirable trait in a young woman. I dabble in a bit of writing myself. Had a few things published when I was younger."

"Really?" Orangia leaned forward. "What sort of things?"

"Oh, some ten-pennion novels about a princess who solved mysteries. Nothing note-worthy. Really self-indulgent fantasy, as they say."

Orangia sat back. In her mind, something went *click*.

"Perhaps you might give my Missing some pointers," she said.

Lenore nodded. "I'd be happy to encourage a young woman's literary exploration. Roger quite liked my books, although he would go on and on about the Harderien Squires. An old beau of mine wrote those. It's wonderful they've met up, isn't it?"

"Yes. An interesting coincidence."

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, and Orangia rose. "I can't imagine who that could be."

"That will be the queen," Lenore said. She sipped her tea. "I hope you don't mind. I wrote to her and told her where we would be staying. I like to visit the relatives when I come to Manking."

Orangia froze and stared at her.

Chapter 11

Missing woke with a start, the lingering remnants of a jumble of thoughts on her lips. Even in sleep her mind had been busily regurgitating pertinent facts, although they appeared to be in the shape of large butterflies and in varying shades of purple.

"Study!" she said. Ivy blinked at her in the glow of their lanterns. The baker was the only one still awake.

"Ah. I was wondering when you would get to that."

"What time is it?" Missing rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"A few hours after midnight."

Missing looked over at Cadaberous Bray. He was perched on his heels. His long arms were folded in his lap, and his head dangled between his shoulders, like a carrion bird at rest.

"He said he studied the salt-digger," Missing said. She sat up, and realized she had fallen asleep on Roger's shoulder. He stirred a little and mumbled something. Ivy frowned.

"I'll have to talk to him about that," she said. "He's casting spells in his sleep."

"If Bray has been studying the thing all this time, how could he not have known it was chained up?" Missing looked at her. Ivy looked back.

"He *did* know," she answered herself. She gnawed on her lip a moment. "He knows everything about that dragon. That's his job. And knew it had an egg, too. He said *the* egg when I mentioned it. But he hasn't done anything to help." She grimaced. "People are truly wretched, aren't they?"

"I don't know," Ivy said. "Perhaps in this case they are just helpless. After all, how was Cadaberous supposed to get that chain off?"

"But he didn't even try."

"Have you asked him?"

Missing paused. "But he still keeps putting out the gold. Why?"

Ivy laughed a little. "Think about it, Miss. We had a conversation about this once, a long time ago. You've got one dragon, and one egg. That is inconsistent. He mentioned it himself."

We were the ones who called the dragons...He said 'See how they eye the gold, Cadaberous. See how it pleases them both to have it artfully arranged.'

"When Roger and I saw him in the mines, he said 'She needs you,'" she whispered. "I thought he meant Esmariah."

It dawned slowly, in shades of purple. "There's another one. There's always been another one. One to burrow and make eggs, one to protect the nest. Bray thinks he can call the protector back with the gold."

Ivy nodded. "I assumed the same."

"But that's not what it would come for. All the time she's been trying to get free, she's been calling to it," Missing said. A slow shudder ran through her. "Either the other one is dead, or it's going to be very angry when it gets here."

"Probably."

"We've got to get that chain off."

"I've been working on that." Ivy said. "I think I've thought of something. Did you see the part where she'd been chewing on it? It was pretty badly damaged. I imagine if Croomb gave it a

few good whacks with that sword of his, it might just break apart if she pulled at it hard enough. She could probably do it herself, if she had another month or so. She just needs a little bit of help."

Missing drew in a breath. "He'd be right up next to her face."

"Yes. So we will have to make certain her face is otherwise occupied."

"Zarzurfuggle," Roger muttered. The light of their lanterns flared up a little, then ebbed again.

"Who do you think is stealing Esmariah's gold?" Ivy asked.

Missing looked away. "I have no idea."

"That's not true. You have a very good idea."

Missing sighed. "Yes, well, maybe I just don't want it to be true. I never wanted to be involved in any of this, you know."

"I don't think *that's* true either," Ivy said. "I think you've wanted to be involved in something grand for a very long time, Miss. I think you've wanted to be a part of life for quite a while, only didn't know how to go about it. And tinkering around in the upstairs bedroom with your paper and ink and stories that never amount to much was a very safe and perfectly logical excuse *not* to be, wasn't it?"

"I'm devoted to my craft," Missing said.

"That's a very noble sentiment of absolute excrement," Ivy said. "If you were devoted to it you'd be out looking for the real stories behind those stories of yours. You'd be putting a little life into the lifeless. Like that poem for Penham-Wynek. Now that shows some promise. It speaks to me, Missing, and I don't even live there."

"How did you know about that?" Missing sat up.

"Roger told me. He memorized it. Walks around saying it to himself all the time."

"He shouldn't–he *can't* just–he wasn't even supposed to see it!"

"He's the best thing that ever happened to you Missing Sealyham, and if you'd stop being Titus Sulk's emotional whore for one moment you'd see that," Ivy snapped.

Missing's mouth opened, then shut.

"Now that's enough of this game. You haven't had the luxury to play it like other girls have, and for that I'm sorry. But you're too old now and too clever to be acting as if you haven't a brain in that head of yours. Things are changing, Missing, and if you intend to just crawl back under some blanket of anonymity you'll spend a long life being bitter about what might have been, just like your aunt. And even *she* gets out once in a while," Ivy finished.

Missing opened her mouth to retort. A thousand replies buzzed on her tongue. *What's the use*, seemed to be the most prevalent. Then there was *people are stupid anyway,* and *no one sees me for who I am,* and *what do you care.*

But Ivy held up her hand suddenly, and cocked her head to one side. "Wake Roger up," she said. "Someone's coming."

Missing poked Roger in the ribs angrily, and he woke with a start. He glanced at her, then rubbed the sore spot on his side quizzically.

"Someone's coming," Missing said. Ivy was quietly waking Croomb and Bray. Roger sat up and doused the lanterns. In the sudden darkness Missing sat back and pouted.

A single lantern made its way down the tunnel. The dark shape behind it stepped down carefully into the cavern, and the pool and the walls caught up the light of the flame and flung it around. From her hiding place Missing saw the thief's face illuminated and sighed, wanting to shout and cry at the same time.

Titus' eyes lit up at the sight of the gold Bray had laid out, and he moved forward, dumping a large bag down on the sand. Then he knelt, ignoring his fine clothes, and began to pilfer. A smile of

dark, self-satisfied glee rose up but did not quite reach his eyes. Into the bag went the larger items– the boy and the duck, the frame of the time-piece, the candle-holder and the coins. The necklaces were next and, as he dug them out of the sand, Titus drew them over his own head and let them lay on his neck. Then he walked about, his arm thrust out like that of a woman waiting to receive a kiss, his chest protruding so that the golden bangles bounced up and down as he cavorted on the sand in a mad mimic of feminine strutting.

"*Thief*," Mister Bray said.

They watched Titus put the necklaces in the bag at last. Then he knelt in the sand to pick at the scraps of gold, the lowest refuse of the treasure meant only as decoration. He worked his way up from the shore of the pool, tongue between his teeth, long pale fingers plucking small shavings of gold from the sand. Finally, satisfied he had gotten every scrap, he reached out toward the one item left.

"Oh." He giggled. "Gran will just *love* you."

"You leave that alone, Titus Sulk!" Missing shouted, unable to contain herself. She burst from behind the rocks with the others on her heels and stormed over to him. He was so surprised he barely fought when she dragged the bag down off his shoulder and threw it aside. Then she grabbed at the golden dog in his hand. There was a brief struggle before she came away the winner. She handed the small knick-knack to Ivy, who secreted it away in one of her pockets.

Croomb and Bray both moved to block Titus' only exit. Roger moved up beside her. She felt his arm brush against her bare skin.

"Missing?" Titus' jaw fell.

"That's right. Did you think no one would ever know? Did you really think *someone* wouldn't find out? I've been watching you, Titus Sulk."

He didn't flinch. An infuriatingly coy smile flitted around the edges of his mouth. "Well. I *did* know that much. And enjoying the view from what I gathered."

Missing barreled on through the unwelcome heat of a blush. "It's the money, isn't it? You've been gambling with Esmariah's gold, haven't you?"

"I had to come up with something," he said. "Gran only gives me a pittance."

"Yes, and heaven forbid you try getting a *job*." Missing shook her head. "Didn't you think for one moment that I would figure out that you've been stealing from Esmariah all this time and using *me* to do it? Or did you think I wouldn't care?"

"It *was* much easier once you came along." He licked his lips. "Perhaps we've just been playing the same game, Missing. Using one another to get something we both wanted." He grinned. "Or did you really think I could ever be interested in a great, fat *cow* like you?"

That was when Roger hit him.

* * *

Orangia sat quietly in a shadowy corner of her own living room like a guest. She didn't quite know what to do with herself, so she sat as rigidly as she could. Every now and then her hand strayed back to smooth her bun.

Orangia's imagination had not developed much over the years. As the older sibling of a flighty sister, she had never been afforded the opportunity to be delighted by life, because she was generally the one who had to clean up all of life's little messes for everyone else. The only daydreams she ever allowed herself, as she sat by the light of a candle doing extra mending long into the night, was that of gentility. She was too sensible to believe she could ever achieve it, but convinced herself

she could at least *behave* as if she possessed it.

Gentility, she thought, had everything to do with behavior. She had striven all her life to be prim and proper, seeing in these mannerisms a sort of spiritual connection to a higher plain of existence. She watched ladies of substance on the street not jealously but studiously–hers was the eye of a scholar striving for tenure. She learned to fold her hands just-so, and to walk quickly but without any display of haste. She learned to eye people from the side, so that even if they were taller than she, it appeared that she was looking down on them. She developed the habit of saying little, so as to give the impression that she knew much. She kept her emotions tightly in check, and never let them range across her face. She was, in effect, like a battered and second-hand copy of a book on protocol–the noblest of sentiments housed in the scruffy façade of a classless woman.

And because she was so sensible, she had never once deluded herself into thinking she was above her station. She knew exactly who she was, and had always been painfully aware of it. So she sat in the corner of her own house, Mistress of Nothing in a place that she had striven so hard to be master of, and watched the queen with unabated delight and self-loathing. The two emotions warred within her in a complicated tangle–after all, the queen was decades younger than her, and in any other situation of social standing would have been subject to her maternal reproach on several topics, including the brevity of her shirt And Orangia still had not gone to the privy.

The queen was complaining bitterly to her cousin. She did it exactly the same way every working-class wife did, only she managed to be transcendent and regal and made her complaints sound like national emergencies.

"He's been going on and on about that wharf for months now," the queen said. "Meanwhile, what have I got to do but manage the entire city on my own? Taxes and tribute and salt mines and feminist uprisings. And when it's all over, will they say how helpful I was? Of course not." She snorted in a way that was both delicate and somehow exceedingly genteel. She was remarkably similar to her cousin, small and neat and bird-like, with dark hair and enormous green eyes.

"*They* will laud *his* name and say how clever he was to have noticed the sea was coming in. Would you believe he's constructed a full-scale model of the sea-shore and the city right in the middle of the dining-room table? He and his advisors throw water on it every day to see what the tide will do to his little sugar-houses and sand. Those advisors of his are nothing but a bunch of heathens. I've caught them putting their feet up on the furniture and laying their ale-mugs down just any old place." She gave a martyred sigh. "It's just like a man to play with his toys when there are bigger things at stake, isn't it, Lady Orangia?"

Orangia blinked. "Ur," she said. She had not yet been addressed by the small woman, who flounced resplendent in jewels in Orangia's best chair and had brought a small army of armed men with her, leaving them outside the door like a dog outside a tavern.

"Of course it is," Lenore soothed. She glanced fondly at her husband, who was snoring in a chair with four cats in his lap and one draped over his shoulders. "But that's what we do, dear. Let them play with their toys while we tidy up after them. It's part of the joy of marriage."

Orangia started a little. Having never been married, she had not realized this was one of the perks, and didn't think she liked the sound of it much.

"I'm glad of the feminist uprising though." The queen pursed her lips. She did not appear to have any other name that had been offered. "I've been trying to get the women of this city motivated for five years now so that I might have an excuse to have a few laws changed."

"Have you?" Orangia spat out, then blushed at being so forward.

"Of course." The queen nodded. "Some of the laws we have are just ridiculous. Goodness knows *I* didn't write them, and neither did my Merrill. But you know, it's impossible being the queen

and trying to *change* anything. People look at you and think 'oh, yes, what would *she* know about it?' They think it's some pampered whim when it comes from high up, don't they?" She looked at Orangia.

Orangia considered it a moment. If the queen herself one day suddenly declared women free of all restraints, knowing the laboring class as she did, they probably *would* view it with suspicion. Perhaps a way to get more taxes, or force women into civic duty when they were perfectly happy with civic anonymity. But now…

"Yes." Orangia nodded. "They need to want it themselves."

"That's right." The queen brought her little fist down on the armrest of her chair. "There must be a need. This Black Lotus seems a clever woman."

Orangia laughed. She couldn't hold it back. "The Black Lotus is the pampered daughter of one of the city's most well-known families who started the entire thing to avoid a marriage that her grandmother arranged and *you* enforced," she said, relaying what Missing had told her.

The queen looked at her sharply, and Orangia's smile fell. There was a long moment of short silence.

"That little Grumm girl?" the queen asked. Orangia nodded, her tongue dry.

"Well," the queen said. "Anything I can do to help the cause."

Lenore laughed. The queen laughed. Orangia managed a sickly smile at a crisis avoided.

The queen sighed and sank down into her complicated crinolines. "She'll be better off anyway. That brother of hers is a horrible gambler and her Grandmother is loony. This marriage will give her some stability." She yawned. "This is a beastly time of night to be awake, Lenore."

"Couldn't be helped, dear. We only just got here this evening."

"And the flyers said that women's walk-out is scheduled for the break of dawn," the queen said. "I suppose I shall have to oversee it." She frowned. "I don't do well without my rest. And I'll need all my charm for this event, I know it." She grimaced. Then she looked at Orangia.

"I don't suppose you've got a little sherry around, Lady Orangia?" she asked. "Something to take the edge off?"

Orangia shook her head. "I don't indulge in spirits, my Queen."

"Oh," the queen said, with obvious disappointment.

"However," Orangia said slowly. "I do have a special tonic I take on occasions of low spirits. It…it really isn't so bad with a bit of salt and a lime."

The queen and Lenore both leaned forward, their eyes sparkling.

"Sounds like mother's tonic we used to sneak, Lenore," the queen said.

"Sounds like," Lenore agreed.

"Do you remember the time we stayed up all night drinking, and you took off all your clothes and ran down the alley singing–"

"I'm certain that was *you*, dear–"

"Oh, what was the song now?"

"Wee Willy Winkle?" Orangia offered.

* * *

"Id's brogen," Titus complained.

"It isn't broken. Stop being such a baby." Ivy pressed her kerchief to the boy's nose.

"I hit him pretty hard," Roger said. "It *might* be broken."

"It isn't broken," Ivy said.

"Id's bleedeeg."

"Noses do that. It isn't the end of the world."

"Hit him again Roger. Practice makes perfect," Missing said. She was so furious, her fists clenched all on their own and wouldn't let go. She had never felt this way before. Never felt quite so *good*.

She liked being angry. She liked it because Titus' comment gave her a good reason to be, and for the moment she could ignore that she had been such a fool because he had been the cruel one. And, she realized as she looked around, she was in the midst of people who did not like what he had said about her at all. There was something powerful in that camaraderie. Something exultant in the way they all–except Ivy and Titus–seemed willing to believe she had endured all she had in a sort of willing martyrdom to catch the thief of Esmariah's gold. As long as the others never found out the truth, she could bask in the glow of heroism.

"Titus Sulk, I charge you with thievery," Croomb said. "You shall be placed in my custody and transported forthwith to the prison on Banner Lane. There to languish until arrangements may be made for your trial."

Missing looked at the Inquisitor. "What will happen to him?"

"Considering his family connections, I imagine he will be released after a brief stay in one of my cells. I'll make certain he does some sort of uncomfortable community service for it, but as for the money, the Gasps and Sulks will settle it between themselves, I imagine. Esmariah will make him pay somehow."

Missing and Ivy exchanged a glance.

"You know, Croomb," Ivy said. "I think I might just have a way for Titus to work off his debt to society right here and now."

"Anythig," Titus said. "Jusd don' pud me in a jail cell."

"Oh good." Missing smiled. "Then it's all settled, although you'll still have to pay Esmariah back. You may have to actually get a job."

"We could use an assistant in the bakery," Roger offered. "Pay you half a pennion a week."

Titus' eyes widened. Then he sighed, and his shoulders sank. "Whad do I hab to do?"

"You're going to help us," Ivy said.

"Helb you?"

"Yes," Missing said. "You're going to help us bait a dragon."

They trooped back through the tunnels to the nest and saw the egg half-submerged by the risen tide.

"There." Missing pointed. "You see that, Titus? That's her egg. Fifty years she digs and digs, just for this one thing, and you took that away from her."

Titus appeared to be more interested in looking at all the gold. "By all the sebenty-two gods and their three hundred and forty-seben incarnations," he cursed. "If I had known this was here–"

"How did you find out about all this?" Croomb asked.

The young man shrugged. "Fambly legends. We always talged aboud id."

"And when you found out it was true?"

Titus turned his gaze to Missing for a moment. "I needed the money. I bed on a winning horse, and used the money to hire some fellows to cub down here and chain the dragon. Then all I had to do was watch for Bray to make a deposit. I was good. But I god bedder when Missig came alog. I did't hab to follow Bray aroud all the time."

"What about the fellows you hired?" Mister Croomb asked. "Surely they wanted in on a cut of this?"

Titus shrugged. "Only one of them surbibed, ad he did't hab much to say afterward. Actually, I don't think he *could* talg. Considerig the condition he was in, I assumed my suspicions aboud the dragon were righd. I should hab cub down myself, so I could hab found this. Bud they god the job done. Their famblies were paid well. I thing they all moved off and boughd farms somewhere."

"You hired men to come down here and die? That's disgusting." Roger wrinkled his nose.

Titus gave him a sideways glance that had a sneer in it, held at bay only by the memory of Roger's fist. "They were bery poor. You might say I helbed them."

"Does Prudity know?" Missing asked.

"No. Nor wood she care. As long as she's god her dresses and fancy shoes, she's habby. Prudity is bery uncomblicated that way."

"I don't think she's as uncomplicated as you assume," Ivy said.

They moved onward toward the salt-digger's cave and found the creature dozing. The craters of her nose widened slightly when they entered the cave, but she did not move.

"Good," Ivy said. "Maybe she's tired."

"I imagine banging on the chain will wake her up a bit," Missing said.

"Banging on the chain?" Croomb said. "Who's going to bang on the chain?"

Missing and Ivy turned to look at him. "Well, you've got the sword," Ivy said.

The burly little man backed away. "Oh no. I became an Inquisitor because it's *safe*. Nowhere in my job description does it say I have to be eaten by a dragon. That's what happens to knights, not Inquisitors."

"Do you happen to keep any knights handy on your person, Inquisitor?" Mister Bray asked. Missing couldn't tell, but she could almost believe it was meant to be funny. It didn't work very well though. Cadaberous Bray was not the sort of man who could pull off a joke. It probably had something to do with his small, terribly bright eyes.

"Don't be silly Croomb. You won't be in any danger," Ivy said. "We're the ones who are going to be keeping her preoccupied. All you have to do is bang away, right there where she's almost chewed it apart. And possibly duck every now and then."

"Oh no, nod me." Titus was slowly trying to back away. He ran up against Roger, who balled up one fist and raised an eyebrow at him.

Missing was getting impatient. She had been trying to screw up her courage for the last ten minutes. It was stubbornly hiding under the divan of her soul, and wouldn't come out. So she decided to force it.

"Why are you all being so ridiculous about this?" she snapped. "It's *got* to be done, or the entire city is going to fall down. Someone has to do it, and we're the only ones here. Now look."

With that she shouldered past them and stomped over to the creature. Her courage elected to stay behind, so that when she got there she was completely alone with her own idiocy, which wasn't a very good companion.

"Nice dragon," she muttered under her breath. It exhaled at her and did not open its eyes. Up close it was like standing next to a house with a mouth full of teeth. Missing reached out and lay her hand for one moment on its nose. It was rough, and warm. Then it moved, and so did her legs.

Harunk.

"You see?" Missing squeaked from behind the safety of the group. "Nothing to it."

"I didn't know you could run that fast," Ivy said.

"Neither did I," Missing admitted, her legs trembling with the effort.

"Right." Croomb drew his sword and squared his shoulders. "Let's get this over with."

"Titus, you go over by that wall." Ivy pointed past the creature's head. "Everyone else fan out

and, whatever you do, keep her teeth away from Croomb." She winked at him.

"Ah ha ha," Croomb said.

They positioned themselves around the creature's head carefully, while Croomb approached her neck. By the light of their lanterns, set carefully off to one side, they could see sweat pouring down his face. The creature still had not opened her eyes.

Finally, Ivy nodded. Croomb raised his sword and brought it down on the weakest point of the chain. A sound rang out, an enormous, flat *clunk,* and sparks flew.

The creature's eyes popped open. Ivy dashed in and waved her arms at it.

"Hoy!"

The animal turned toward the baker. *Harunk*. Ivy scurried safely to one side.

Croomb darted in, sword raised, and struck again. *Clunk.*

Roger and Missing both ran at her nose as she whirled to confront whatever was banging on her neck. *Harunk*.

Croomb ran in. *Clunk.*

Harunk.

They continued their mad parody of tag, alarmingly aware that if they were to be tagged, they would not get a second chance, and there was no home spot to yell "Olly, olly, oxen free," from. The dragon had her eyes wide open now, but had not yet moved. She appeared confused, but game. Her interested gaze said that sooner or later she expected one of them would probably get caught in her teeth.

Missing took a moment to breathe and watched Croomb run in again. There was something in his actions that she had not seen before, though she suspected it had been lingering around him for a while. Some small kingliness–in the way his jaw was clenched, in the way he battled the iron chain as if it were a more horrible dragon–buried under the running hair dye and aged paunch.

"Hurry Croomb! Before she gets up!" Ivy shouted.

"It's only a ceremonial sword!" he shouted back. "The edge is starting to bend!"

"Where's Bray?" Missing said, noticing the absence of the tall man.

"Ran off I suppose," Roger panted, finishing another run.

Croomb ran in, the edge of his sword visibly flattened, and gave another try. The *clunk* was louder this time, and a piece of iron flew off to one side, ringing against the cavern wall just above Titus' head. The young man ducked and cowered, his arms covering his face. The salt-digger turned toward the sound.

"*Titus*!" Missing screamed at him, but he appeared to be frozen. The creature's jaw widened, and Missing's courage groveled in the pit of her stomach. Her idiocy seemed willing though, and propelled her to his side.

As the creature lowered its head, Missing reached out and smacked it sharply across the nose–an act akin to trying to chase off a small mountain by throwing a pebble at it.

"*No*," she said, in the voice reserved for cats who were scratching at the furniture. At the same time she reached down and hauled Titus up by the collar of his shirt. The creature's mouth snapped shut and its eyes widened. It drew back, blinking in surprise.

"*No*," Missing repeated for good measure, and shoved Titus across the floor toward the tunnel entrance. They nearly ran into Bray there. He had come from the nesting room, and had a large, golden-hilted sword in his hands. He darted past them, cloak flapping, and ran at the creature's collar.

"*Aaaaaaaaah HAH!"* he shouted. He nearly swung himself up off his feet as he brought the sword down. For one moment, there was a space between his boots and the floor. Then all the power

of his noble intent brought him back to earth, brought the sword whistling down, and sparks shot up around him, illuminating his cadaverous face for a split-second like the craven image of some old prophet.

Clunnnnnggg.

The chain snapped. The dragon moved.

"Get out!" Ivy screamed, barreling toward them and grabbing up one of the lanterns. Croomb and Bray were not far behind her. Titus had already taken off down the tunnel, and Missing felt Roger's hand on her elbow. She glanced back once to see the creature on its feet, sniffing curiously at the collar lying in pieces at its feet. Then it shook its head, eyed their tunnel, and began to lumber forward. She was slow, being so big, but she had intent which made her singularly focused on her prey.

"She's coming," Missing panted, diving after the others.

"Run faster," Croomb advised as he passed her.

It was the strangest race she had ever been in. They followed Ivy's bobbing light through the twists and turns, and it seemed to Missing the tunnel had actually become longer. The ground did not quite shake as the salt-digger moved, but it did tremble slightly. Missing was almost certain she could feel the thing *breathing* on her but would not look back. If she did that she would scream, and she didn't have enough breath for screaming and running.

"The-nesting-room," Roger panted over his shoulder as he ran. "Hide-in-the-gold. Once she's got-her-egg she'll-whew-leave-us alone."

Missing nodded, seriously questioning whether she would make it that far. But suddenly she had, and tumbled out of the tunnel opening with the others. Ivy stood in the middle of the room, with her lantern raised.

"Hurry," she said, her hair lying tattered around her face. "Behind that shield. Croomb, Bray, over by the armor."

"Where's Titus?" Missing asked.

"Down the other tunnel already," Ivy said. "There's no time. Hide!"

The baker nudged Missing toward her hiding place, then placed the lantern on a gilt-edged desk so that it shone all around, casting the edges of the room into dark shadow. Then she herself took up a spot behind a large statue of some long-dead benefactor whose golden façade had apparently seemed more valuable as tribute than as statuary.

The salt-digger did not merely emerge. She burst from the tunnel spewing mucus, her movements full of the energy and ire of her driving, preservatory instinct. She was more enormous than they had been able to comprehend, and longer than Missing had thought. She had a blanket of flesh that, while all bunched up, had hidden thick ropes of sinew and haunches of muscle. Her nostrils flared. She swiveled her head from side-to-side with a nearly audible *shwum, shwum.* Her enormous eyes fell on the egg's nest at the same time Missing's did.

"*Roger*," she hissed, digging her fingers into his arm. "*Where's the egg?*"

The dragon threw back her head and screamed. From the sea outside, something answered.

To be concluded in the July 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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